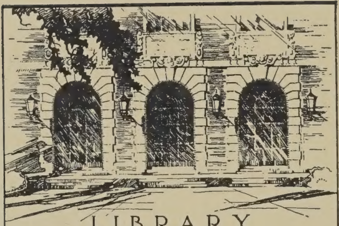

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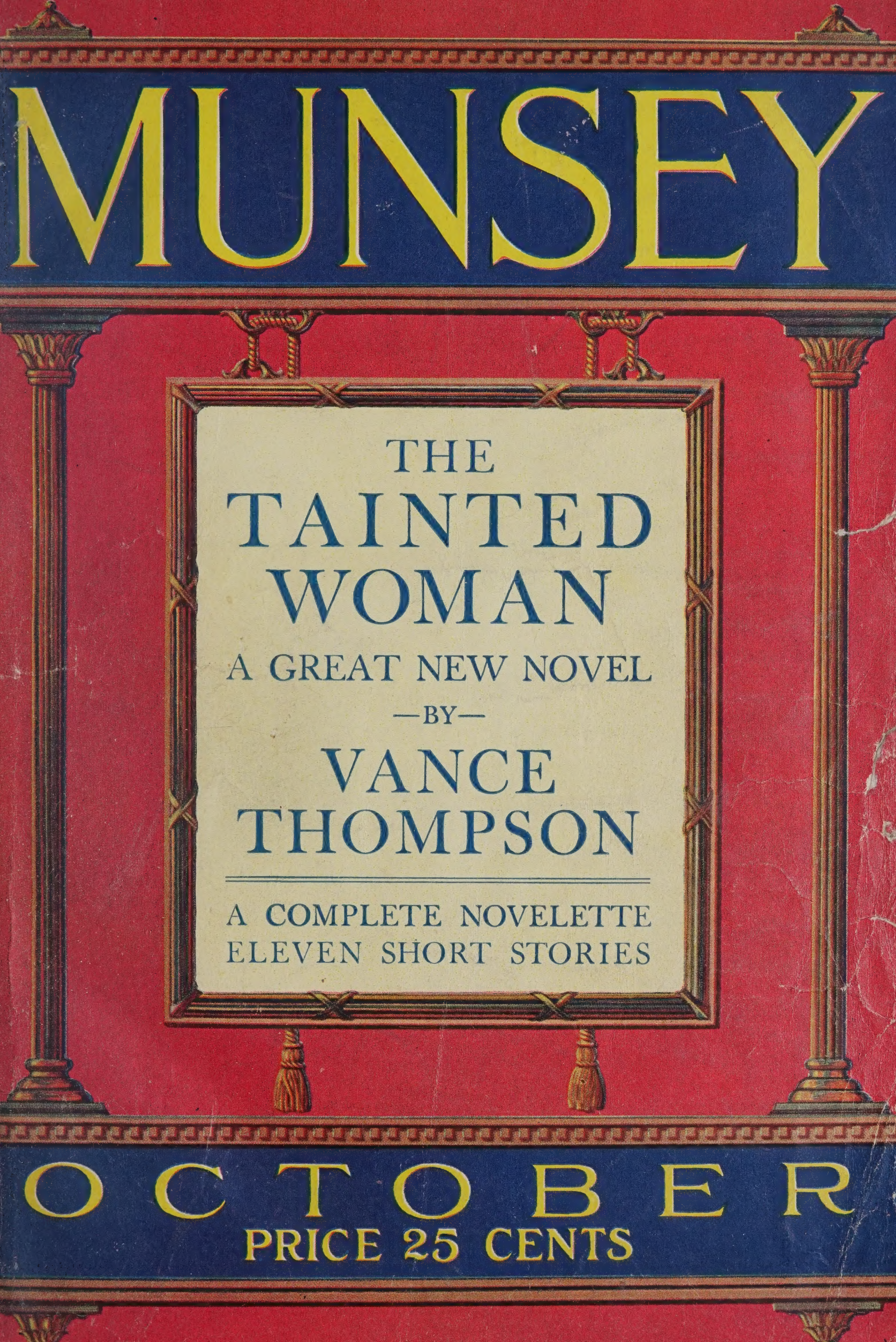

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OCTOBER
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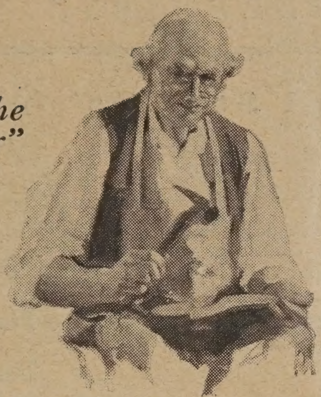

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1—Letters must be written in the English language, and on only one side of the paper.

2—The competitor's name and address must be written at the top of the first page of the letter.

3—The letter must be mailed in a sealed, stamped envelope. *No post cards will be considered.*

4—There shall be no limits to the length a letter may be; and any competitor may send in as many letters as desired.

5—This Contest shall be freely open to anyone, anywhere.

6—The first prize will be awarded to the contestant whose letter on the subject, "Nothing Takes the Place of Leather," is the best in the opinion of the judges.

7—The Contest opens officially June 30, 1923, and closes October 31, 1923.

8—In case of tie, both or all tying contestants will receive the full amount of the prize tied for.

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THE NOVEMBER MUNSEY (on sale Saturday, October 20) will offer as its chief new features "The Last Man on Earth," a sparkling novelette by John D. Swain, printed complete, and the first chapters of "The House of the Wicked," an absorbing novel of the Far East, by Eleanor Gates and Frederick Moore

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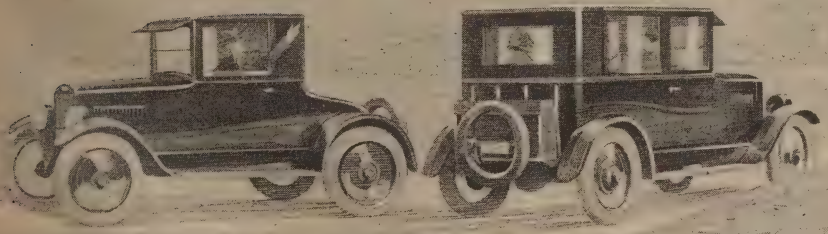

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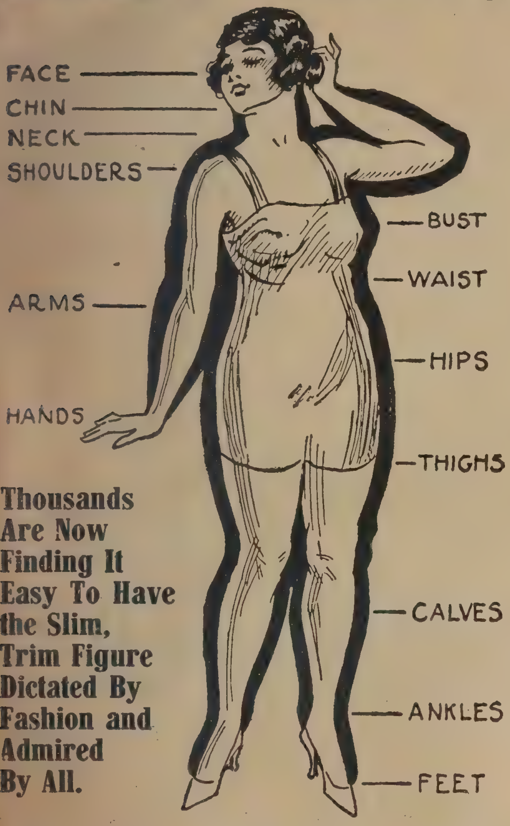

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MUNSEY'S
MAGAZINE

OCTOBER, 1923

Vol. LXXX NUMBER 1

Sunken Cities

A COMPLETE NOVELETTE—THE STRANGE STORY OF A LOST ISLAND OF THE PACIFIC

By Douglas Newton

Author of "Green Ladies," "The War Cache," etc.

THE disaster came suddenly. The sea was quite smooth. The air was thick and hot, and so windless that every sail hung slack. All weather conditions were fair. The only indication of anything unusual was the coppery mist that magnified the moon and turned it to orange.

I didn't see the first wave, for I was taking my trick below. Vampage said it was as high as Popocatepetl and traveling at the rate of a thousand miles an hour. Knowing Vampage for the precise scientist he is, one can gauge the moral effect of that wave on him.

Luckily we were practically bow on, and the schooner went up the watery slope of this marine Popocatepetl in a dizzy swoop. That was where I woke. Coming out of a dream in which I was climbing a wall like a human fly, I found myself shooting through the air. I landed on what I thought was the floor, but it wasn't, as I found when I discovered my foot through the frame of one of Vampage's Inca drawings, which hung on the forward bulkhead, near the ceiling.

I did find the floor a minute later, for the schooner righted. She also began to jump and pitch like a mad horse. We were in the rough water at the top of the wave, and were getting hell.

On deck I saw the most nerve-destroying sight I have ever looked upon. The sea all about us was lashed to an incredible fury. It whirled and tossed into waves that looked like spouting mountains.

From the look of things we were in the heart of a tornado—only there wasn't any tornado. There was no wind. I think that unnerved me most—that terrible, tearing sea, which threatened to swamp us any moment, behaving as it did under a serene and windless sky.

As I rocked and slithered, and was kicked hither and thither by the great slaps of the sea, I crawled, drenched and holding on for life, toward Vampage at the wheel. He was holding on to that crazy wheel with the concentration of a giant; but he was able to gasp in no great voice, so still was the air:

" Earthquake—submarine upheaval—get sail off her, Warenne—wind presently!"

I clawed forward on the wild and bucking deck. I yelled for our three kanakas, but none came, so I let the mainsail down at a run. There wasn't so much risk, as there was no wind.

One of the men, Toao, came up then, and began to stow the big sail. His teeth were chattering, and he let me know why. The two other men had gone overboard.

Before I could get to the jib, wind hit us. It did the work for me. It blew the canvas right out of its bolt eyes, and for the moment I thought we were finished.

We heeled, and the sea seemed to flow right over us, unopposed. Then we kicked out of it into a night still serene, though I could see massed clouds hurling forward like armies of devils on the charge.

We ought to have been swamped out and drowned a score of times during the next two or three hours, but by a series of miracles we were not. I need not describe what happened to us during that time. Vampage and I clung to the wheel, trying to keep the schooner before the wind, and wondering when the end would come.

About three o'clock in the morning we thought it had. The fury of the waters, now no more distinguishable than pale gleams in the intense darkness, seemed to redouble until the whole world raved insanely. There came a series of crashes, bumps, whirlings, heavings, and poundings. I had the foolish impression that we were turned over and over like a pebble rolling along the floor. To this day I can't say whether that was what happened. I heard Vampage's voice bawling, close to my ear:

" Hit—something—surely?"

I knew instinctively that our mast and most of our rail had gone. I also knew instinctively that no other human being had ever gone through such an experience; and then, quite suddenly, things were almost deadly calm.

Not really deadly calm, for the wind still howled over us—but it *was* over us. We didn't understand it, but we seemed to have been forced into a pocket of a dead calm, a little hole in the storm, with the tempest raging on every side of us.

The schooner was on even keel, and so steady that we seemed fixed on something—a sand bank, we thought. This was confirmed by the fact that, though strained and leaking, the water did not gain, but maintained a level that was actually below our water line.

It was too dark to see anything, and we were too much exhausted to care whether we were going to die or not. When we found that the storm no longer touched us, we simply flopped down on the deck and slept.

II

The hot glare of the sun woke both of us practically at the same time, and we opened our eyes to a world in full daylight. We saw that the reason why the sun hadn't waked us an hour earlier was that it had only just struck down on us from over a high cliff.

I was staring, amazed, at that unexpected high cliff wall, when Vampage cried in a tone of amazement:

" By Jove, it *is* the Wahine Rock!"

I turned and followed Vampage's eyes to the sky line, and there, sure enough, towered the profile of that lonely and little known ocean mountain top—the Wahine Rock.

I was quite as startled as Vampage. We had been sailing for the Wahine Rock. We wanted to study the megalithic remains there. We had a theory that we could connect up the great stone fortresses and gigantic heads on the isolated and uninhabited Wahine with finds we had made of ancient civilizations in a certain remote valley of the Andes.

My surprise, however, was not at finding that the curious tempest of the night had carried us safely to the very point we wanted to reach. It was a more astounding thing than that. It was that the Wahine Rock was no longer the Wahine Rock.

The Wahine, as I have indicated, is—or was—no more than the summit of a mountain thrusting itself above sea level, as the St. Paul's Rock in the Atlantic does. It was—I had better keep it to " was "—well outside of the trade routes. It had practically no vegetation, and was the most desolately isolated of all the Pacific islands.

In fact, nobody would dream of visiting

it save archæologists like ourselves, who were interested in the few but remarkably well preserved ruins on the slopes of the rock. These ruins — forts constructed of huge slabs of stone, houses of the same nature, and colossal statues—have been half covered by the sea, indicating that in some previous age the Wahine Rock must have been of greater extent, and that it had been submerged in some natural disturbance of the sea bed.

And there lay the reason of our astonishment. The Wahine Rock was no longer the Wahine Rock. It was an island of fair size. That which had once been sunk by some great convulsion had emerged from the sea, thanks to the earthquake that had done its best to wreck us.

We were lying in a deep estuary between high cliffs, on one side, and on the other a beach and slopes leading up to the crest which we both knew—since we had visited the place—to be the old top of the Wahine. We could also see weeds and deep water incrustations leading up to the old water line, which was now nearly a mile above us.

The seaward end of our estuary was blocked by a bar of slimy shingle, which every wave submerged. We must have been flung right over that bar by the great waves—luckily, for the bar broke the force of the breakers and left us in smooth water. We could see that the schooner itself rested on a bank of shingle that curved up out of unimaginable depths.

"Jove!" cried Vampage. "There's no doubt about it! What an earthquake buried under the sea, an earthquake has restored." He stared up to where the old stone houses and platforms cut the sky. "And, Warenne," he said in a shaking voice, "I believe that that accident is going to give us the greatest find in the annals of archæology!"

"Meaning exactly?"

"Look!" he whispered, and his fingers sketched the outline of the great prehistoric structures. "They continue under water, as every reputable expert thought. Those few remains on the old Wahine are but the topmost buildings, and there are others down the slope. Look at the massing of them! Why, my boy, there are thousands of buildings—a veritable city!"

His excitement had got hold of me now. He was right in saying that there was no doubt about it. Massing all the way up the slope from the beach, greened by sea slime, but, on the whole, curiously free from marine growth, were the buildings of what must have once been a large city.

We could make out, even from that distance, the unmistakable solid bulk of the great block stone houses and platforms, built, it seemed, by giants, who cut their huge stones so cunningly that the walls held firm for ages, though cement was never used. I could see, on great platforms, rows of huge images, some nearly forty feet high, some with the round crowns worn by similar images on Easter Island. The entire mass of houses and platforms and images was built up the mountainside in a way made familiar to us by the Inca remains in Peru and Chile. There was no doubt that a prehistoric city had come to light.

A marvelous find for us! Fragmentary remains of a splendid unknown race, or races, are found all over the Pacific from Easter Island to the Carolines; but they are only fragments, giving mere hints of a departed people whose secret is lost. Here, before our eyes, was a complete city.

"And if it was as suddenly engulfed as it was vomited up again into daylight," Vampage said, "then we ought to find in those houses priceless memoirs of human existence—implements, vessels, ornaments, furniture, perhaps, many traces of a vanished civilization. I say!"

He took a step forward, and peered.

"Did you see something, too?" I said breathlessly.

"What do you think *you* saw?" Vampage asked me.

"It's absurd," I said, shamefaced. "I thought I saw something *walking!*"

He frowned.

"Then I'm absurd, too," he muttered. "That's what I thought I saw."

"Up there by that platform of images?"

"No—down there by that building that looks like a temple."

"Somebody walking?"

"Yes, upright."

We stared at each other. How could anything that walked upright be on that uninhabited rock only just emerged from the depths of the sea?

"No good being fanciful," I said, with a forced laugh. "We're not the only people who could be wrecked here."

"No," he replied. "No, that is an explanation; but—but it was bare skin, I thought."

"And very white skin—very."

"Yes," he said. "Might be natives from a wrecked canoe."

"Might," I said; "only we're well in the belt of the dark Melanesians. I didn't think—it didn't strike me as a human being who'd lost—lost its clothes, either."

"Ah! You boggle at the sex, too!"

"The hair, I thought, was long and—and, well, I couldn't help thinking that the figure was womanly."

"We're letting our nerves trick us," he said decisively. "It could be nothing but survivors from a wreck. If so, we'd better give them a hail."

We both shouted at the top of our lungs. Our voices rang like thunder against the cliff, boomed and echoed up through the massy stone walls of the once sunken city. We paused, breathless, with hammering hearts, and listened.

There arose a most extraordinary sound—a weird sound. It was a frightened, thin wailing. It rose and fell shrilly, musically, as if tangled with its own echoes. It was a queer, pitiable, flutelike, birdlike sound.

"Birds!" said Vampage, in the voice of a man glad to set his fears at rest. "Look!"

A host of birds rose up from one quarter of the island. They flew screaming upward, with a thousand white flashes of wings.

"Gulls, mostly—but there are vultures there," I cried. "What the deuce are they doing here?"

"Feeding on the dead fish that couldn't escape when the island was heaved up out of the sea," replied Vampage.

"Do vultures feed on fish?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said slowly, completely puzzled; "but obviously they made that sound."

He said that, I know, because he wanted to convince himself; but he failed. I wasn't convinced, either. It might have been a bird noise, of course, only—only there had been something creepily human in that wailing.

"Anyhow, there's been no answering shout," he went on doggedly. "What is more, I haven't seen any more—walking. Have you?"

"Not a sign. The place seems dead."

"It is dead," he said resolutely. "We've been nerve-shaken fools, Warenne. The flash of a bird wing, or the play of the sunlight on a flapping weed, has deceived us."

I said nothing. Perhaps it was better to think we had been deceived. All the same, I wasn't.

"Anyhow, we'd better get ashore to look around," Vampage suggested.

"How?" I asked. "Our only boat is smashed, and we haven't enough broken bits to build a raft."

"We'll swim, naturally."

I looked into the deep, black waters of the estuary that yesterday must have been the best part of a mile under the surface.

"Of course we'll swim," I said. "We can't miss looking at that town—only, well, I'm just wondering exactly what sort of sea monsters lurk down there!"

"None, I hope," he answered with a shudder. "If there had been any, we should have seen them floating dead on the water. The change from the deep sea to the surface would probably have killed them. At the same time, we can't take risks."

III

We took as few risks as possible. Leaving Toao to deal with the leaks in the hull of the schooner—surprisingly few, thank goodness—we went ashore. We used a grating lashed to a couple of empty boxes as a sort of raft. Vampage stood on it with his automatic in his left hand and a boat hook in his right. His business was to watch for the rise of sea monsters. I swam and pushed the raft along. I did this not because I was braver, but because I am a good swimmer.

We had, I suppose, about two hundred and thirty yards to go. We had covered two-thirds of the distance when I heard Vampage gasp. I looked up, and saw him staring over my shoulder into the sea, with the most extraordinary look on his face. It wasn't terror. It was a look of astonishment, bewilderment, and fascination combined. He peered into the water with enthralled eyes, not attempting to defend me against anything.

I stopped kicking, and floated.

"What is it?" I cried.

As I spoke, something touched me. It touched the calf of my leg, and ran over it with a gentle pressure, as if to feel it. It passed to the duck trousers I was wearing, tucked above the knee. It tugged gently at them, as if to appraise their texture. It slid up, fingering my belt, and then my silk shirt.

It was uncanny, that touch, but not

alarming. It was as if the small hand of a curious child or girl was trying to discover what I was made of. It was a touch as gentle and as delicate as a caress. I wasn't afraid; but suddenly this thing, this hand, took a firm hold of my shirt and began to tug me downward.

I shouted and kicked. Vampage became galvanized into life. He leaned over and beat on the water with the flat of the boat hook. I noticed that he beat the surface only, striking nowhere near where the thing that held me must be.

The thing left in a flurry. I could feel the water swirl about me as it went rapidly; and I, too, went rapidly, pushing Vampage on his platform through the water at the best speed I knew.

Panting on the slimy beach, I stared at Vampage, whose face was a most curious study.

"What was it?" I demanded.

He could only stare at me with bewildered eyes.

"What was it?" I demanded again.

"I wonder if I've gone mad!" he said thickly.

"You've not," I said; "and one way to keep sane is to tell me what it was."

His answer was staggering.

"Do you believe in the mermaid myth, Warenne?" was what he said.

I sat up, dumfounded. Was he mad, after all? I asked myself that, and somehow I wasn't sure of the answer. After all, that was what the touch had felt like—a girl's hand.

"That was what I saw—or thought I saw," he said, more or less incoherently. "A girl rising through the water — hair floating out like a dark cloud—white shoulders — very white breasts — white arms touching you—hands—"

"A fish tail?" I cried, half scoffing, half serious.

"Legs," he said. "I saw calves, and small feet, very slender, very white. Oh, you're laughing at me, Warenne; and perhaps you're right. Perhaps I am mad; only that's what I thought I saw."

"That's what I thought I felt," I said soberly enough.

I explained my sensations of something plucking at me with a human hand.

No, we couldn't answer the riddle then and there; yet somehow, though the thing was impossible, we had to take it seriously. Vampage had seen. I had felt.

"There was something queer about the neck and throat," said Vampage, elaborating his vague description; "something that looked like fish gills. The flesh seemed curiously transparent, with a beautiful pearly transparency. I thought I saw others, too, in the depths, hovering, as if not so daring as this—this girl. There were pale, pointed faces and dark eyes looking up—white, dim shapes and clouds of hair floating."

We turned it over and over, getting no farther.

"We can't answer that problem by sitting down over it. We may by exploring. Come on!" I said, at last.

I put on thick boots and buckled on the pistol and the big cutting knife that had been carried on the raft, and we made our way up to the city.

The first group of houses we came to told us that we had made a find indeed. They were the authentic dwellings of an ancient and extinct civilization. It was, however, impossible to examine or enter them. They were choked with sea undergrowth, shell and coral incrustations, and the like. We might have been discouraged, had it not been evident that higher up the mountainside the structures were freer.

We went up through a whole belt of the ancient buildings. Then we came to a break, and crossed what must have been, at one time, a sea beach. Above this we went through another belt of houses and platforms, which was less overgrown than the first. The entrances of the houses were still choked, but the seaweeds and corals were more recent, and not so thick.

Out of this belt, again, we mounted what must have been not so much a beach but a harbor basin. The vast mortised walls that edged it had obviously been quays and dockside structures. Indeed, Vampage pointed to some short upright pillars, which might have been used as bollards for the tying up of ships, or of the great war canoes of the past.

Again we were in a belt of houses partly choked with the weeds and accumulations of years under the sea, but again definitely clearer and less deeply grown. Again we walked through this to what must have once been a beach, fronting a fourth group of houses. It was when we came to this that Vampage stopped and cried out:

"I have it! Do you see what happened, Warenne? This island was swallowed gradually. There were four definite subsidences. Why, it is written as plainly as if it were set down in words. Look there! They built on that cliff across the estuary, too."

I looked across the estuary, which, at this height, could be seen opening out into a big bay beyond the schooner. There the layers of houses and beaches were as plainly marked in degrees of age as on a comparative map.

"The lowest city, naturally, was the first to go under water, when something happened in the vast subterranean unknown, and the earth crust holding up this portion of the globe settled down. How many centuries ago that happened, Heaven alone knows. It might have been thousands of years before the first kings of ancient Egypt were ruling. The people of that lower town who escaped, or who had fled to the upper heights at the first rumble of the earthquake, built the next town against the next beach, just above the new water level. How long that new city, that new race, that new civilization lasted we can't say, but in time that, too, was swallowed, as the mountain on which it was built settled once more. Again the survivors built a new city, which stood for centuries, perhaps; but again the mountain sank deeper, and again the city was drowned. Then they built this last city, which is before us, Warenne—their final holding place. They lived there—how long? Then, and not many hundred years ago, from the look of it, their island sank again. All was buried under the sea, save the few ruins on the mountain top that we knew as the Wahine Rock; and with that final submergence the people and their civilization vanished utterly."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

He looked sharply at me.

"Perhaps their civilization has left its history to be read by us, Warenne," he said.

"I was thinking," said I, "of the people themselves."

He gasped a little, and shuddered.

"Better not," he said. "That way madness lies."

I knew what he meant by that. He meant we must ignore the things we thought we had seen—and felt.

IV

We turned and entered the last city of the drowned civilization. From what was obviously a harbor basin, set with marvelous quays built of great stone blocks, we mounted, by magnificent broad steps, to the town.

The quays were splendidly spacious, with floors that must once have been as true as a ballroom. The bollards were unmistakable now, and Vampage pointed out ringbolts let into the stone surface. He hacked at one with his knife until barnacles, slime, and metal came away.

"Looks like a bronze alloy," he said. "Very like that Inca stuff we found among those hidden people."

I thrilled. We had spent eight months in a remote valley of the Andes, among a people never discovered since the days of the Spaniards. We had seen buildings, ideographic script, implements, weapons, religious and social ceremonies. We had studied a language which seemed to us to give the key to the secret of an ancient civilization that must have spread all over the Pacific from Peru to the Java Sea—and even beyond, through Africa and India, back to the civilizations of the Mediterranean, perhaps.

Then we had sailed out to find other remains that could be coördinated with our discoveries; and here, by mighty accident, we had perhaps stumbled on the archæological treasure house that would tell us everything. Although I am not going into details, they being scientific and dry, I will say that at every step we seemed to see things that confirmed our theory.

The quay was guarded by a gigantic inner wall. We passed through it, under a heavy pylon gate of the type that seems to link the monuments of ancient Egypt with those of prehistoric Mexico and Peru. We walked along high-walled, windowless streets of massive stone houses — streets that might equally well have been those of Cuzo or Thebes in very early times.

We went into a small temple tomb, and saw a seated effigy that might have been an ancient Inca or a Ptolemy. The walls were covered with incised picture writing, and there were little guardian gods about, some with bird or animal heads. The writing, I will admit, showed distinct traces of the Melanesian bird cult, but the wall backing of the statue was Inca—a great metal sun, of solid gold, as the point of Vampage's knife showed. A wonderful find, the key to an age-old mystery!

In the houses, we discovered no furniture, but many trinkets and vessels, vases in human shape or animal form, the little statuettes of fused mercury and gold that only the Incas had the secret of working, and writings in ideographic script. I cannot go into the details here.

What soon impressed itself on us most deeply, however, was not a matter of archæology. Even on the quay we had noticed it. In the little temple itself, Vampage spoke of it.

"The place is much too clean!" he cried.

"I've been waiting for you to say that," I replied. "It has been worrying me. There's no marine growth at all—no seaweed, very few barnacles, no coral at all. Apart from this slight green slime, the place is well preserved."

"Too well preserved," said Vampage. "It's been under the sea for many years, to human knowledge. It may have been submerged for centuries. It ought to have a growth over it as thick as on the bottom of a lagoon; whereas—"

"Whereas," I said slowly and evenly, "it looks as if it had been carefully swept, weeded, and scoured—carefully tended."

"Carefully tended—at the bottom of the sea! My dear fellow, don't be a madman! Who could have—"

He stopped, gasped, stared at me. He knew what I meant.

"We mustn't think of it," he groaned. "Come on—we'll explore."

But we didn't really explore. When we reached what must have been the great central square of the city, all thought of exploration was swept away.

As we stepped into this vast place, amid cyclopean walls, the birds rose up. A host, ten thousand screaming birds, filled the air. They were gulls, mostly, but there were several vultures. The vultures worried me a little.

"Dead fish," said Vampage, in a voice which he tried to keep steady. "See them all round by the wall? This square acted like a great trawl as the island lifted out of the sea. No way of getting out save through those four gates, and the rush of the escaping water drove the fish against the stonework and killed them. The gulls are having the catch of their existence!"

"The vultures," I said shakily, "rose from that corner over there."

Vampage threw a quick look at me, and went pale. Perhaps I did, too. We both felt that we were on the verge of abnormal discoveries. Nevertheless, we went straight across the square to the corner that I had indicated.

And there we saw the people.

There were four of them—two men, a boy, and a young girl. They were all dead. They, too, had been flung against the stonework by the force of the departing water, and killed. I heard Vampage's breath coming quickly as we looked down at those pitiable figures, and I knew he was recognizing the creatures he had seen under the water when that shy, curious hand had touched me.

They were slender people, as nude as any savages; but we knew that that was so not because they were savages, but because their habitual element demanded freedom from clothing. The only vestige of garment, if one could call it such, was a belt. In one man and the boy, it was a thing of twisted seaweed. The other man had a belt of metal strips and links, beautifully enameled. We had seen the brother of that belt among the Andean valleys.

The woman's belt was more what one would expect from her sex. From it, after the fashion of a short kilt, were suspended brightly colored streamers of seaweed.

The use of the belts—even the boy's and woman's—was obvious, for each carried a short, daggerlike sword. One of these was of obsidian, two were of some sort of flinty coral. The man with the metal belt carried a weapon of metal alloy. All the weapons were constructed for stabbing. Under water, of course, a cutting stroke is almost impossible.

The bodies before us were short and fine-limbed, but their chests were abnormally large, with the breadth one finds among mountain people and others who have to make the most of an inadequate atmosphere. All four had good features. We recognized them as the features of that hidden race among whom we had lived in the Andes. The nose was high-bridged, the forehead broad, the cheek structure slightly Asiatic.

On the other hand, the mouth was curiously copious and loose, as if accustomed to folding tightly, to shut out some dangerous element. The nostrils, distended now, had a strange rubbery look, as if built to contract to nothing as well as to expand at will. The eyes, slightly protuberant, though not unattractive, had the curious look that one ascribes to a fish.

The skin was very white indeed—blanched, in fact; yet for all that it had a transparency which, in the girl, reached a lovely pearly luster. The girl, indeed, was quite beautiful. Small-boned and slender, with a luxuriant head of hair, she had the appearance of those delicate and exquisite elfin women that Arthur Rackham, the English artist, draws.

Undeniably these were human beings, and yet—

Vampage bent to the nearest male, and spread out the man's toes, which were very long. The webbing between them was as pronounced as a sea bird's. So, too, was the webbing between the fingers. Some South Sea tribes, which live half their days in the water, have this webbing—grown through the course of generations of habit—but none have it in so marked a degree as these people whom we saw on the Wahine Rock.

And there was another thing. Vampage pointed to the man's throat. I saw the strange structure which he had declared the mermaid had had in her throat—gills—the gills of a fish.

Undeniably these were human beings, but human beings modified, through the course of centuries, to live in an alien element—to live in the water, like fishes.

We didn't speak as we stared down at those mermen. We didn't dare. A thousand questions and demands for explanation thronged our minds, but we dare not voice them, for wonder, horror, and distress held us.

"These are not myths," said Vampage, in a hollow voice. "They died only a few hours ago, in that terrible upheaval!"

"That means they were living in this city—living as citizens in a submarine world. By Jove, that is the reason why these buildings are so well kept, why they are free from weed-growths, and are scoured!"

"It's madness!" cried Vampage. "We daren't think of it. It's against nature!"

"The mermaids you saw coming from the depths to me are still living as these people lived yesterday," I persisted.

"Madness!" groaned Vampage. "Here, let's get on and see if we can find the answer to the riddle before our brains crack!"

V

We went on to the summit, and to those gigantic remains which were once the only things that stood above the sea level. We saw now that this last and highest group of ruins was part of the outskirts of the city we were in.

One huge structure we had particularly desired to examine. We had meant to cut or blast away some of the great stones, for on our previous visit we had seen that it was impossible to get into it from the land side. We quickened our steps to it, for we perceived that the falling away of the sea revealed great doors leading into it from the vast platform on which it stood.

As we went forward, Vampage stopped. He pointed to a curiously worn hollow in the rock where the old water line had been.

"What do you make of that, Warenne?" he asked.

"So you've noticed those places, too!" I said. "I've already decided what they are. Did you observe that two of them had roughly hacked steps? Yes? Well, then, I guess you'll agree with me that those hollows are landing places. The people climbed upon dry land there. From the look of it, they did so regularly and often."

"Yes," he said. "Undoubtedly that is what it means; and yet we saw no signs of such people when we were here last, and I've never met anybody who did."

"No," I said. "They hid, of course; but the fact seems obvious that they did—perhaps had to—come out on dry land at times."

"Like seals," said Vampage.

"Like seals, only they have those gills, and can stay under water longer than seals."

By this time we had reached the great platform. We entered one of the big doors in the vast stone structure, more than half of which had stood above the sea on our previous visit. We had brought torches for just this type of exploration, but we needed them less than we anticipated.

Climbing a smooth ramp, we came out on a wide floor that must have shelved out of the sea until it was above the water level. From a hundred natural or cunningly contrived crevices in the massive walls and roof towering above us, the sun shot down intensely golden beams. The place was swimming with a soft, gold-dusty light.

At first we were confused by the dusk. As our eyes became accustomed to it, our wonder overwhelmed us. Vampage put the reason of it into words.

"Good Heavens!" he muttered. "It's like one of the great community huts of the South Seas. Look at those divisions, and the things hanging in them—women's skirts of colored seaweed—images, utensils. There's a rack of those swords hanging up. Over there is undoubtedly a couch of seaweed. By Jove, this was the community house. They came in here for the night—couldn't sleep under water, I suppose. The sea is only half their home, and this was used for the other half of life."

"Not *was*," I said softly. "It *is*. They are in here now. Can't you feel them? Can't you hear them?"

The feeling of many presences was unmistakable. I had the sense of scores of eyes looking at me from the gloom. These mermaid people were gathered in the darkness, watching us.

Vampage felt it, too, I could see. Both of us heard it—the rustlings, the queer, sibilant noises. Our eyes turned instinctively to a dark bay in the vast building. Vampage's arm shot out, and he flashed the light of his powerful torch into the gloom.

The immediate result was flurry and panic. We heard the scared bird wailings that had startled us back on the schooner. We heard scufflings and the rush of bodies. We saw white forms and flowing hair scuttling across and out of the bright rays of the torch. Yes, the sea people were there and alive—and humanly frightened!

Vampage called in a level voice to reassure them, and made a step forward. Immediately one of the stone knives came flying through the air—very badly thrown, but its intent obvious. Vampage switched off his torch, and we retreated toward the nearest door.

"Better get out of this!" he said. "We've disturbed and frightened them. They may attack us, and we don't want to shoot them. Better get out, and let them get used to us and our good intentions gradually."

We backed out, down the ramp, to the platform outside in the sunlight; and there the accident happened.

Twenty of these strange amphibians had run out of the community house and upon the platform. In the sunlight, their courage had come back. Most of them being women and girls, their curiosity had got the better of them. They stood, a delicate, lovely, and fairylike group, looking anxiously and eagerly at the doorway through which they expected us to emerge. They stood, beautifully poised in their slender grace, ready to run, yet eager to see.

They did not realize that we had come out of another door until we were very close to them. Then their panic was profound. They turned and scuttled like so many startled pixies across the great platform. I have never seen a more beautiful sight, as their slender limbs twinkled and their pearly skins shone in the sun, while their long hair floated behind them, shining like lovely sea wrack.

Then, with a shrill cry, one frail girl stumbled over an unevenness in the platform, staggered, and fell. She lay still, stunned, and the rest vanished.

We ran up to the poor, delicate thing. In my arms she seemed, indeed, as insubstantial as a fairy. I never saw so delicate, so pointed and piquant, a little face. The beauty of it thrilled me. She had suffered a heavy blow on the temple, and lay cold in my arms.

I forced just a drop or two from my brandy flask between her teeth—sharp, pointed little teeth. Her soft little shoulders shuddered, and she opened her eyes. She looked into my eyes for a minute, and then shrank away from me in fear, fighting to escape.

I smiled at her and let her go. I said over and over again the ancient word, the token of friendship, which we had learned in the mountains of Peru.

She seemed to understand either my word or my smile. She hesitated; then panic came over her again. She wriggled upright from my knee and tried to run.

I let her have her own way absolutely, making no effort to hold her; but she was too dizzy to go far, and there was a gash on her shin that must be paining her. After three strides she sank down again, hiding her face in her arms.

We did nothing at all, but simply left her alone. In a minute her shoulders stopped shuddering. She even stole a look at us. We sat squatting, smiling at her.

In another half minute she turned her full face to us. Though she was trembling, both curiosity and reassurance were getting the better of her. Crouching, supporting herself by one slender arm, she faced us while she examined us steadily. I uttered the word of friendship again, and held up bare hands—the simplest gesture of peaceful intentions.

She sat up. She was conquering herself, or her curiosity was. She gave a half smile —a lovely, pixy smile. Then she grew afraid again, and dragged her stone stabbing sword from her girdle.

We smiled again. We lifted our own big cutting knives, and carefully put them down on the platform, away from us.

Then she really did smile. With a delicious little gesture she put her weapon away, and allowed us to approach.

We made motions to show that we wanted to attend to her injured leg, and I took out the first-aid packet we always carried. After some hesitation, she stretched out the leg, and I took it into my hand.

She watched, frightened but interested, while I gently washed the wound with water from my bottle. She giggled when I dusted boracic powder upon the cut. She was in raptures when I put a patch of goldbeater's skin over the wound, and bound the slender, delicate limb with an anklet of soft lint. It was a new trinket for her.

Her courage had come back completely. Her elfin smile came perpetually. Her thin, fine fingers played over my hands, pinching them gently, to see if they were real flesh.

My clothes amazed her. Tugging at my shirt, and finding it wasn't tight skin, she gave bird laughs of wonder. The bright, slightly futuristic silk handkerchief in the breast pocket of my shirt filled her with amazement. When I gave it to her, she was in a transport of delight. She suddenly flung her arm around my neck, with the abandoned gesture of a child, and gave me a little hug. Then, springing to her feet, she turned and waved the handkerchief, like a flag, at the others.

There must have been two score of the sea people on the platform by this time, half of them men. The women kept at a timid distance, and hid as much as possible. The men stood a good way off, with their queer swords in their hands, hesitating between flight and attack. The gestures of the girl we had succored reassured them a little, but still they would not come near.

The girl limped toward them, calling to them as she went. This was our first proof that they had a spoken language. She used distinct words, and though we did not understand, we felt that some of them, at least, had root sounds very like the language we had studied among the hidden people of the Andes.

Still the others would not come forward, and the girl, smiling at us, looked back and forward, at a loss. We merely smiled and waved our hands to her, and left her to her companions.

It was no good hurrying things, we knew. We must allow the girl to tell the others that we were friendly and harmless, and leave them alone ourselves until they had become accustomed to the idea of us.

We thought we had plenty of time in front of us—months, probably, of the most wonderful study and discovery.

VI

One happening, at least, on the way down to the schooner warned us that we might be wrong.

We were on the beach between the second and third of the once submerged cities, when the world began to tremble under our feet. It was a sharp and horrible sensation. The motion threw us flat. We heard the birdlike screaming of the amphibians around us, and knew that they, too, were terror-stricken. And no wonder. For the space of a minute and a half the very earth swayed and rocked, buckled and heaved—and then was quite still again.

"Another shock!" said Vampage, as we climbed to our feet. "I don't think we are finished with these earthquakes yet. It seems to me that before we start thinking about studying these ruins, we'd better satisfy ourselves that the schooner is still seaworthy."

"You don't mean you think the island may sink under the sea again, Vampage?"

"I hope not, for the discoveries we are to make; but it did so before, and may do it again, and it would be wise for us to make sure that we ourselves possess something capable of floating."

That was the first untoward thing that happened to us as we hurried down to the sea. The second was physically still more fearsome, though perhaps less momentous.

We had gained the lowest of the belts of houses—the city that must have been submerged to a depth of nearly a mile before the earthquake heaved the island above the sea again. Making our way through a wilderness of branching coral and massed and decaying marine growths, we saw something stir in a pool of water and slime. We stopped and looked—and a monster crab rose and attacked us.

The mere sight of him made me sick

with horror. He was a loathsome brute. His legs were tall and spidery, like stilts, and they lifted him at least four feet from the ground. His blotched white body was enormous. His big fixed eyes stared straight into mine with cold voracity.

He came with a jump and a sharp, scuttling run that was groggy, but full of the beastliest intention. His enormous nippers poked out at me, and the froth of hungry desire bubbled out of his mouth. I was helpless with a nauseating fright.

Vampage killed the brute with a single upward stroke of his big cutting knife. The knife, in fact, went clean through its body, with such ease and force that it fell to pieces.

" A deep sea crab," said Vampage, as we examined the monster. " No armor, and as soft as pulp. It was probably dying, from the change from deep sea pressure to air. He'd be an ugly customer in his own element, though."

" Yes," I said, " and it seems to me that there may be other and still uglier creatures flung up by that earthquake. We'd be wise to have the rifle with the exploding bullets ready for action."

VII

When we reached the seashore, we found that, slight though the earthquake tremor had been, it had wrought astonishing changes. The first knowledge of this came from the fact that a strong sea was pounding and whirling up the estuary, which told us that the shingle bar that had protected it had sunk. It was evident that in that tremor the island must have subsided at least five feet.

We were naturally anxious for the schooner, but we soon found that Toao had been quite adequate to meet the situation. Floated off the shingle bed by the dropping of the land, he had allowed the drive of the incoming sea to carry him up the inlet, where, choosing his moment, he had made the impetus carry him around a long range of old buildings stretching out into the estuary like a breakwater. He had been carried right across the smooth water here, and had grounded the schooner on a smooth, sandy flat.

He was up to his waist in water, when we arrived, examining the hull of the schooner for leaks. He had already cut away the tangle of ropes that bound the broken mast to the vessel.

He was a very calm Polynesian, Toao, and he told us that with a very little patching the schooner would be quite seaworthy. And in fact we found this out while we worked on the hull, as we did nearly all that afternoon.

Toao was quite undisturbed by fear of earthquakes or death, but the sight of the amphibians filled him with superstitious terror. He told us that they had been swimming about the ship ever since we left it. They had climbed out on the rocks, or floated, face and shoulders showing, as if they sought to allure him. He had been so much afraid that he had been on the point of barricading himself in a cabin, when the earthquake tremor had frightened all of them away.

" Why were you afraid of them?" we asked.

" But of course, lords," he answered. " Did they not want to drag me down to death? That is what they always do."

" You know all about these people, then?" said I.

" Certainly! This is the place whence come the Women of the Beaches. That is why it is called the Wahine Rock — the Woman's Rock. All through the islands they are known. Have you not heard the story? There are certain bays with lovely beaches, which these women haunt."

" They can't haunt," said Vampage, grinning. " They're human — flesh and blood. Only spirits can haunt."

" Whatever they are," insisted Toao, not at all shaken, " they are not as people of this world. They haunt these beaches, waiting for men. If men go upon the beaches, then they show themselves, and, because they are beautiful, the men love them; but when the men go into their arms, they are dragged under the waters and are gone forever."

" We know that fairy tale," I said, smiling; " but I don't think it has anything to do with the people here."

" This is called the Wahine Rock for no other reason," declared Toao. " They have been seen here by men of our race."

So these amphibians had been seen on the Wahine before, by natives! All the same, we were not at all inclined to think that these people had anything to do with the familiar South Sea legend of the Women of the Beaches.

" There are men among the people here, too, Toao," Vampage told him.

" Of course," he admitted. " They are those they have pulled under the sea."

" But they are all white," I argued, " not dark, like the people of the islands, and they have high bones in their noses, like ours."

" It is the sea that changes them," said Toao, unconsciously quoting Shakespeare.

Toao held to his definite opinion, but we could not agree with him. Why should we? His theory was fantastic, while we knew that we were facing decisive facts.

Here before us, in these four submerged cities, was evidence of a civilization going back for very many centuries—perhaps for uncountable centuries. The people we had seen showed the strain not of the Polynesian or even of the older negroid type, but of a rarer, whiter race. They were, in fact, akin to the very high type that we had found in the hidden Andean valleys, and we were convinced that they were the remnant of a tremendous and highly cultured people who had dominated the greater portion of the two Americas, and probably the whole Pacific belt also.

" I'm thrilled, Warenne," said Vampage. " I really do believe we are on the verge of the greatest historical discovery of the age. I feel that if not from these amphibian people themselves, then certainly from their ruins, we shall solve the riddle that has so greatly puzzled every archæologist who has studied the question of extinct American civilizations."

" I confess," I smiled, " I am thinking, at present, more of the people themselves."

" *She* was certainly a very lovely little thing," he answered slyly.

" Very lovely," I said, blushing; " and, because she is so lovely, she helps me to concentrate on the human and personal side of the matter. Why is she amphibian? What condition of things forced her and her kind into a physical shape in which she can, and perhaps must of necessity, live in two elements—water as well as air?"

" Perhaps you have answered that yourself, Warenne," he said. " Necessity did it. I've been thinking on those lines this afternoon, and I believe it is the only answer. Besides, everything conspires to that end. Take, first, the four submerged cities. The four—or there may even have been more—separate catastrophes that gradually drowned what may have been a thickly populated island kingdom, must have assured the people of their ultimate doom. The disasters probably happened at long intervals—indeed, they must have done so; but nevertheless, the race that was gradually forced up the mountainside by successive submergences must have seen that there would come a day when the island would be completely, or almost completely, engulfed. They were a cultured, a brilliant, and perhaps, in their way, a scientific race. Let us agree that their history taught them what, logically, would be the end of their island home. They knew, that is, that a final earthquake would sink their kingdom —or most of it—under the sea. They prepared themselves to survive such an end."

" The best preparation, Vampage, would be to take ship and search out a more stable island or mainland," I jeered.

" *We* think so," he said. " Did they? I think not. Indeed, facts prove not. They did not take ship and go away, for they are still here. Possibly they had arrived at the conclusion that the whole world was to disappear under the seas. The subsidence of other islands, maybe, made them feel that. We can see for ourselves that they must have prepared themselves to survive in a world that was merely water—and apparently they succeeded."

" But, my dear Vampage," I cried, " do you mean to tell me you think that ordinary, normal people deliberately trained themselves to be half fish, half human?"

" Deliberately, or by force of circumstances, they have become half fish, half men, haven't they?"

" But you're talking about a physical impossibility!"

" Am I? Surely not. Don't we know half a dozen tribes between here and the Australian coast which, from constant swimming and traffic with the sea, have developed a definite webbing on their feet and hands? These people only carry that webbing a stage further."

" That doesn't explain their gills. We don't know any tribe with gills like fishes, do we?"

" We do know, though, that quite a number of children are born with gills, Warenne. Indeed, it's not so very strange, for it is an established fact that the rudimentary organs of the fish exist in all of us. Is it inconceivable, then, that constant training to live an underwater life might have redeveloped those gills which all men have? It may have come about through the evolution of centuries—"

"It would take a good many centuries!" I scoffed.

"Would it?" he grinned. "What about the latest scientific warning as to women turning themselves into four-toed animals, owing to the use of cramped shoes? Shoes are not so many centuries old, and yet we can already see the female little toe shortening itself toward the point when it will vanish altogether. Why, then, couldn't these people redevelop their fish gills under deadly need, by great effort, and even, perhaps, by some surgical treatment we don't understand? In any case, have you another explanation that fits? Here are definitely human creatures, with characteristics that you and I recognize as belonging to one of the oldest races on the earth's surface. They are human beings, and yet half fishes. How did they get their dual nature? What other plausible theory can you offer?"

"They may always have been like that."

"That is a theory quite as fantastic as mine, Warenne," he returned; "and I don't think it holds good. Did you observe those great carven images? Did you notice the image we saw in the temple?"

"Not closely," I admitted.

"If you had, you might not have used that argument. Not a single statue showed signs of gills, rudimentary or otherwise. The gods of their system, then, handed down, as they were, from past ages, were like other dwellers on the earth. They had no gills. Why? Because the men who first carved these gods hadn't gills, and reproduced the human form as they saw it."

I was silent. The argument seemed final. Vampage summed up.

"It seems almost a miracle, but I cannot conceive of it being anything but a fact. As these people saw the earth, as it were, disappearing stage by stage under the ocean, they trained themselves—made, perhaps, a religious rite of it—to live most of their lives in the water, and so save themselves from extinction. They succeeded, too—not quite, perhaps, for that community house up there seems to prove that they must spend some time on the earth, in their ancient element, the air. They probably have to sleep above water; and if they are sick, no doubt they must go ashore."

VIII

We were at dinner, and we sat in the growing dusk, thinking of the strange life of these amphibians on the island. We sat there until the sun was almost down.

Suddenly we were aroused by an outcry from Toao, on the deck. We rushed up, only just evading the Polynesian's charge as he ran to cover. On deck we realized why he had bolted. The ship was surrounded by women — the siren women, Toao thought.

It was really a wonderful and beautiful sight—and amazingly fantastic, too, if you like. The schooner, now properly calked, lay out about a cable from land; and all around us were the women—scores of them, old and young, mature and as slender and girlish as dryads.

They paddled gently, keeping themselves perfectly upright, their milk-white shoulders and breasts and their pearly arms lying on the shining water. About them and behind, their hair floated gloriously, weedlike but magical. Their pointed, elfin faces were turned to us, and their little pale mouths were smiling in fairy fashion. Their eyes looked shadowy and shining.

All about us women with milk-white shoulders looking at us, laughing at us with little bird laughs, raising slender, lovely, eerie arms that seemed to draw us!

"By Jove!" I said with a beating heart, looking on that ring of delicate and uncanny loveliness. "It does look as if Toao was right. They seem like siren women enticing us into the deep!"

Vampage's voice came unnaturally cold—I suppose he saw the effect on me.

"Don't be an ass, Warenne. They've merely come to pay their respects and proclaim their gratitude. Observe their votive offerings."

I saw that they had brought us presents. Along the side of the ship lay an amazing array. There were brilliantly scaled fish—veritable rainbows—in soft nests of wondrous seaweeds. There were shining pearly shells, branches of prismatic coral, strange stones that glittered, fine woven fish nets of seaweed, eating fish in piles, shells that were like horns, a score of wonders. They had brought their best offerings to us, the things that seemed to them the crown of beauty and utility.

"I believe they think we're gods!" I cried in an excited voice, drinking in the smiles of the women all around.

"Let 'em," said Vampage harshly, "as long as they don't find out we're far too human."

I laughed jeeringly, but I knew he was right. There was something about these frail and fragile things that seemed to intoxicate me with a dangerous fairy allure.

One swam close, calling to *me* in her birdlike voice; and she was most delicate and beautiful. I leaned toward her. Vampage put his hand on my arm.

"It's all right," I said. "It's the little girl we helped this morning. Isn't she a dear? I say, isn't it etiquette to return presents? We'd better open up one of those cases of trinkets we brought for trade."

"I think *you'd* better do it," said Vampage grimly.

"Perhaps you're right," I laughed unsteadily. "I'm beginning to understand why Ulysses tied himself to the mast when he was in the neighborhood of ladies like these."

When I came back with the trade goods, Vampage, scientific old stick that he was, was squatting as near to the water as he could, with three women floating quite close. He was patiently trying them out with simple, primary words of the dialect we had learned up in the valleys of the Andes.

"I believe we're right, Warenne!" he cried with excitement. Fancy being excited about a dialect when three lovely faces, with lovely shoulders to match, were floating a foot away! "I'm sure these are the same people. Their inflection is shriller, stressed differently, and there are deviations in accent and meaning, but there is undoubtedly a common root. Listen!"

But there was to be no listening. The exquisite sea creatures had caught sight of the articles I carried in my hands, and they raised such a twittering and bird calling, such a laughing and cooing, that the solemn subject of language roots was swept right away. Even Vampage had to join in distributing bead necklaces and armlets, bits of brightly colored cloth, and the two dozen other gaudy things of our line of trade.

The moon was up before we were through with it and all the women had swum off, twittering, with their loot—that is, all save one. She remained looking up at me, slender, exquisite, lovely, her little hand grasping a broken bit of rail, her body half out of the water, so that she could see me the better. She was the girl I had aided.

I stood looking down at the sheer white beauty of her as the moon shone down over her. Pointed face, lovely and alluring; hair as dark as night, making a tent over the pearl of shoulders and breast; dark, mysterious eyes shining out of shadows up to mine. I was thrilled, intoxicated. I couldn't tear myself away.

She put up a hand, and I caught it. It was cold, but soft and thrilling. It pressed mine, it pulled gently, gently. My blood pounded, and I half yielded, moving toward the side of the schooner.

Vampage's hand caught me tight at the elbow, and his voice said harshly:

"Don't be a fool, Warenne! *You haven't gills.*"

I came to myself. I bent down, kissed the tiny hand, laughed, and waved adieu. Then I went pointedly down below, even as Toao had.

IX

I CAME up again presently, and sat quietly in the night.

Yes, they went ashore to sleep. I saw white forms moving in the moonlight, white forms stretched out in sleep. I saw on a near-by rock, sitting like an exquisite statue, watching me, a white form. I thought I heard singing—singing gentle, soft, birdlike, singing that might be wind in the rigging, singing that seemed to have a call, a deep sea call.

I wondered if here was the secret of all the legends of the sirens. Was this, perhaps, the remnants of a race that existed and was known in the days when myth was made? Did the ancients know them to be sirens, and real? Was there a truer explanation of their existence than Vampage's theory?

They called—they seemed to pull at my heartstrings, bidding me plunge into the sea to get to them. Their beauty, their singing bird notes, seemed to overpower my will. I stood up.

Vampage heard me. He came up solidly, told me that it was impossible to sleep below, and sat lolling against the stump of the mast. He dissipated all myth and mystery with his powerful presence, and with his even more powerful tobacco.

X

THERE were other things to disturb us that night. We had another earthquake shock. It was short and sharp. There were amazing crashings and bangings—the noises of earth splitting and heaving. We seemed to be lifted up and dropped a terrific distance, then whirled hither and thither.

For half an hour we were in utter chaos, and I felt that our last hour had come. Then, quite amazingly, we settled, gently rocking, on the bosom of a calm sea. It was amazing, because, with the shock, a storm had developed again, and we could hear an ocean inferno raging elsewhere; but we were untroubled. We rode calmly, not even feeling the wind greatly.

We saw why when we awoke the next morning. The earthquake had done terrible things to the Wahine Rock. The great cliff which I described previously as being between us and the open sea had either crumbled away or been engulfed again. Only a low, rocky, splintered surface lifted between us and the angry ocean. It more than kept the breakers from us—it had locked us in. Part of it had fallen across the mouth of the estuary, and we were now on a lake completely landlocked.

That meant a great danger for us, I'll admit, but we spent less time in considering it, just then, than in examining the effects of the shock on the Wahine Rock. It was ghastly to look at that. Nearly half of the island had been swallowed once more by the sea, two of the cities had vanished again, and the water was covering most of the houses of the third. Of the amphibians themselves we saw not a sign. They had either taken shelter higher up the mountain, or gone under water, where they would be safe from the storm.

Our own desires, as a matter of fact, made demands on us. We saw that if we were not lucky, the greatest historical find of the age would be snatched from us. Any time now there might come another shock that would drown the last city, with its marvelously scoured and preserved remains. That was the idea which obsessed us, even to the exclusion of our own danger and the fate of the strange amphibian people.

We went below to eat a hasty breakfast, ordering Toao to do his best to move the schooner in toward the now distant mountain slope. When we came on deck, we were close in against the colossal walls of the third town, with the waves of our lake beating gently against them. I was standing by to cast a rope to the housetops at the water's edge, and Vampage was taking the tiller, when something happened.

First, like a flight of flying fish, there came shooting right out of the depths a score of white forms. They came leaping and darting to the surface; they wheeled and flashed and scattered like fish fleeing from some cannibal enemy. It was a moment before we realized that we were watching the amphibians flying for their lives.

Their shoulders flashed white out of the water, their long hair streaming, and they hurled themselves upon the land. More and more of them came darting upward and landward. Once ashore, they all ran for their lives. In a trice the sea and the foreshore must have been peopled by some two hundred darting and panic-stricken things.

Then, with a heave and a monstrous bulge, the water of the lake was disturbed. A wave seemed to burst its way up from the very depth of the sea, sending great ripples all over the inlet, and rocking the schooner. Vampage sprang forward and threw the anchor over to the nearest building, with his eyes on the water.

The sea heaved and boiled, and from the bowels of the world a vast white back heaved into sight. It seemed long, rounded, wrinkled, and shining, like the back of a great elephant; but there was a vile, sickly whiteness about it that filled the throat with disgust. There was a smell, too—a foul, musty smell of immemorial slime.

The disgusting white mass heaved itself out of the water. I saw an immense, long, beastly, pulpy bladder of a body, with arms that lashed the water in a mad fury.

Vampage swore, and backed hurriedly toward the companion.

"What is it?" I howled. "What the devil is it?"

"A squid!" he shouted back. "A deep sea octopus! The earthquake kicked it from the bottom to its wrong level. Heaven help us if that monster ever gets a feeler on us! I'm off for the rifle and the explosive bullets."

I stood rooted to the deck with horror. I have seen squids before. I hate them even when they are of ordinary size; but this was gigantic. Perhaps I am exaggerating, but it seemed to me to be bigger than an elephant. It was fabulous. I've never seen anything to approach it. There are no squids of that monstrous and repulsive size in ordinary waters.

This had grown and bloated in the dim, dark caverns at the bottom of the sea. It had lurked there evilly, under the pressure of deep water. Only the force of an earthquake, perhaps, could have heaved the brute to the top.

I watched it lashing out in fury, churning the lake with its mighty feelers. The amphibian people darted hither and thither, in the water and out of it, to escape. I thought they would all get away, but one, coming toward us, stumbled amid the growth on a housetop.

With a dart like a great spider, the monster flung himself sheer across the water. His long arms rushed into the air, uncoiling like flung ropes. Most of them missed, but one didn't. A tentacle snapped and gripped around a leg—a leg that had a lint bandage on it. The girl screamed and fell, clutching at growths of weed to hold herself against the deadly pull.

The squid, finding her resistance, pulled itself toward her. It slid over the water with evil effortlessness. Other tentacles curled out, gripping solidly here and there. It settled back to pull. I could see its devil face, its cold, immobile eyes, its sack-like and horrid mouth.

It pulled, and the girl slipped, screaming. She stabbed at the sucker that held her with her absurd stone dagger. She dropped the dagger, to clutch at the weeds with both hands again. Her eyes were fixed on me—on me!

The brute monster was pulling inexorably, sure of its prey. I was paralyzed by the horror of it all. Vampage was standing at my side now, cool, steady. He sighted his rifle at the thick of the body, so as to have all the flabby mass in the line of the bullet. He fired.

The mountainside above us rang and roared with the explosion, and with the crash of the bullet detonating inside the squid. I saw fragments of the pulpy flesh fly, but it was like shooting into a jelly, for all the effect it had.

The noise of the explosion nearly did the mischief. The girl screamed in fright, and all the others screamed at the clamor of the rifle and its echoes. She let go, and the monster pulled.

Vampage's second shot rang out, and his third. Each went home and burst, shattering the flaccid mass. The brute was lashing the water with its long arms, but one tentacle held, dragging at the girl.

A fourth shot! I jumped upon the nearest point of land—the roof of the great house the girl was on—and ran, scrambling over the weeds, toward her. She was giving in. The strain of that terrible pull was too much. She had yielded hopelessly, and was being dragged along to that horrible maw. Her slender arms were locked across her eyes.

I slashed with my knife at the tentacle that held her leg. Three savage cuts, and still it was holding on and pulling. The huge, fetid body was hideously close, making me sick.

I slashed again. Another feeler shot uncurling through the air toward me, hissing past my face, missing me by an inch only.

A fifth and a sixth explosive bullet sank into the very substance of that loathsome brute and tore it to pieces. My last slash severed the feeler, but I'll admit that the deadly steadiness of Vampage's shooting did as much to save the girl as my efforts.

The octopus, seemingly, was preparing to turn and fight its more deadly foe. It slid off into deep water as its feeler parted, darted away, turned, and seemed to stand at bay, its suckers lashing and churning the water into mad foam. Still Vampage fired and fired, and the great pulpy carcass was blown into fragments before our eyes.

At the tenth shot, the brute seemed to realize from which direction its death was coming. With a gigantic effort it hurled its huge, torn mass right out of the water toward the schooner. I held my breath. If the octopus reached the schooner, or even got its tentacles upon the rail, it might drag the vessel down into the depths.

Vampage fired again. With admirable coolness he shot straight at the horny mass about the mouth, and the bullet exploded there with shattering effect. A cloud of ink burst from the brute, and the water was clouded for yards; but when it cleared the squid had gone, sunk right out of sight.

XI

I GOT the girl to the schooner. She was in a dead faint, and it took us some time to bring her around. At first none of her companions would come near, for the sound of the firing had frightened them almost out of their lives; but, as they saw that we were treating the rescued girl gently, they gradually began to come close.

Soon the girl was able to sit up. She waved assurance to them, and they came stealing over the half submerged housetops toward us, gathering about the schooner. Vampage had pushed the vessel off a little way.

"If they come crowding aboard," he explained, "they're likely to sink us."

There were, all told, between two and three hundred of the amphibians. All of them, males and females, were between the ages of infanthood and, I should say, thirty-five. We had begun to think that no member of this strange race ever reached the age of forty, when a group of oldish men, surrounding one even older, came through the crowd to the edge of the nearest housetop.

The oldest man wore a diadem of beautiful enamel and gold work, and carried a clublike scepter that made Vampage open his eyes with pleasure. There was reason. That peculiar crown, and the scepter, were the traditional badges of royalty in that ancient valley of the Andes that I have so often mentioned.

"The aged king," Vampage muttered to me, "and his court of priests, wise men, and advisers—and not one of them over fifty! This race is obviously at the end of its run, and we have come just in time."

These old men, in their forties, were wrinkled and shrunk like ancients. They carried all the marks of a degenerating strain. They walked as near to the schooner as possible, while all the other amphibian folk drew back, so that not even the kingly shadow should touch them—a taboo as ancient as the islands.

Since these rulers wanted to speak with us, Vampage ordered Toao to pull the schooner close inshore by the warp.

"We'll have audience with his majesty, Warenne," he said, smiling with anticipation. "A great chance for us! He or some of his courtiers may be scholars. The priests, perhaps, may be full of historic lore. We may have a unique opportunity for learning things!"

"I'll leave that side to you, for the present," I replied. "I'm more inclined to take a few private lessons in their language. I seem to have a unique opportunity for that, too!"

I glanced down at the girl we had rescued. She was sitting in an attitude of half terrified wonder, looking at my watch in her hand. Vampage grinned.

"You're a frivolous devil, Warenne," he said. "Always ready to let exact science slide, if there's a chance of a little philandering! However, I don't know that you're altogether wrong this time. Flirtation is the oldest method of language study."

He was right enough there. I had the happiest day with the dainty and delightful girl. She was really lovely—half fairy, half mermaid, strangely abnormal, and yet human enough. She was full of bird twitterings and raptures as I showed her over the schooner.

Fire frightened her a little, and the smoke of my pipe awed her. I gave her a biscuit, and she thought it was an amulet, until I bit a piece myself. Timidly she followed my example, and then spat it out, in disgust. Its sweetness revolted the taste of a creature of the salt water.

Our clothes and the fact that our fingers and toes—I was barefoot—were not webbed, and that we hadn't gills, were things to marvel over constantly. She would not believe that I could not dive under the water, and remain under as long as she could. She was unmistakably grieved at my refusal to dive overboard with her and explore the underwater world. She thought I did not like her well enough.

But I didn't indulge *that* folly. If I got into the deeps with her, she would probably hold me down until I came to the death which Toao insisted was the inevitable end of all who coquetted with such sirens. Her superior swimming powers would master me, and she would hold me under quite innocently, not recognizing that I was differently constructed.

I therefore remained resolutely on deck and above water. In spite of her seductions, I spent a really happy day — the happy day one would spend with a queer but adorable girl, who was as unaffected and playful as a child.

Of course, there were strange moments. To find that every now and then she began to pant in the heat, and only recovered after diving into the sea, and disappearing from sight for ten or even twenty minutes, was disturbing. To watch her swimming languidly ten feet under water, and turning on her back and blowing a playful stream of bubbles at me; or to see her suddenly dart like a flash and catch a fish, and hold it and let it go—or, as she did on one occasion, come back to the schooner with it and calmly eat it—all this was curious indeed.

It was a bizarre, extravagant, and yet

strangely beautiful experience. After a delightful day in the company of that delicate and dainty creature, I can well understand how it is that the myth of the mermaid has always had an alluring and lovely fascination for the race of earth-bound men. Strange, isn't it, that it is always sea maidens, mermaids, never air maids, that call to us? Well, I understand now why that is. This exquisite little creature put a spell on me.

XII

Besides, my time wasn't all spent unprofitably. When Vampage returned, I had a notebook vocabulary of phonetic words, taken down as the girl spoke them, which was far ahead of anything he had managed.

"Made a good beginning," he said of himself; "but it was very tiring, and not too pleasant."

"I saw that being the guest of kings and prelates wasn't going to be as pleasant as staying at home," I told him, with a grin. "There was method in my frivolity. What did they do to you?"

"First thing they took me into a big, dark building up in the top town, sat me on a sort of altar, and wailed at me."

"Good Lord! They were making a god of you," I gasped.

"Something like that," he said sourly. "I was uncomfortable, and the proceedings were tedious. It was too dark to make out anything clearly. They don't need light, those—those fishes! They can see in the dark. And I dared not do anything, for fear of scaring them. Then we all went along to that big community house—to the king's chamber in it, I take it. There I was supposed to enjoy a sumptuous banquet. Ugh! It was really a trifle too revolting!"

"I know. Maura—that's the name of the girl, as far as she pronounces it—gave me an exhibition of the local appetite. It is simple but disturbing, eh? You just catch your fish, and eat it then and there. Made me shudder to see those sharp white teeth of hers at work!"

"There was that, of course. All the fish was raw, but there were trimmings, too—queer-looking sea fungus and weeds, horrible jellyfish, sea slugs, and so on. I might have stood up to them cooked; but to bolt them just as nature made them, and some of them alive—ugh! It 'll take me a long time to get over it. If I wasn't famished now, I couldn't bear the sight of food!"

It grew very hot and still and sultry as we examined my vocabularies on deck after dinner. Vampage scowled every now and then at the sullen, coppery sky.

"I hope it will give us our chance, after all."

"Hope what will?" I asked, seizing the opportunity to roll a napkin ring along the deck to Maura, who was sitting where our rail had broken down, her feet paddling the water.

"This darned earth disturbance," Vampage growled. "I don't think we're done with these earthquakes, but I do hope that the next will keep off until we have finished our work."

"I hope so, too," I agreed, watching Maura's transports of delight as she handled the shining ring of filigree silver. "I doubt whether we could develop gills as rapidly and as effectively as these amphibians did!"

But Vampage, being a scientist, had no time to think of his own safety.

"We're on the verge of an epoch-making discovery, Warenne," he said. "There is no doubt about that. This vocabulary of yours proves it. It's a first-rate day's work!"

"Oh, a little frivolous humanity is a good servant to science," I grinned.

"Yes," he said, so seriously that I wanted to shout with laughter. "That vocabulary of yours has made the first step in a stupendous discovery, I verily believe. You can see for yourself that it has a definite affinity with the dialect we picked up in Peru. Certain things are called by practically the same word, if we allow for the slight difference in accent. That links up with the things we saw in the upper town here—the script writing, the wall paintings, the images, the vases."

"And the features of the people themselves," I said softly, as I looked at Maura.

"Yes—the features of the people themselves, too. By Jove, it all fits in, Warenne! I'll swear they are the same race. I'll swear that we have hit upon the first people, the earliest civilization, of the Western Hemisphere. Think of it, Warenne! We have unearthed the secret of a great cultured race that dominated, perhaps, from the Peruvian mountains to New Zealand—an empire that ruled all the scattered islands. Perhaps they weren't scattered islands then, but large tracts of land, or even one vast continent. Who knows what these earthquakes may have done with physical geography?"

"In any case," I said dryly, "it is not the duty of a true scientist to weave fairy tales about it. We must still consider them as having always been islands, unless we find differently."

"And we will!" he cried enthusiastically. "Don't you see that, Warenne? The whole history of this unknown and fabled race is ours to read. We've found our Rosetta stone, only it happens to be alive, human, and vocal. Those vocabularies of yours, the additional ones we will collect and perfect through conversations with these people, the translations of the wall writings they will give us—why, Warenne, we shall be able to read the hidden history of half the universe! The Easter Island ideographs will no longer puzzle us, as they have puzzled all the archæologists until now. We'll translate the unreadable carvings of Yucatan. Do you understand, Warenne? We've found a new world, a new history. We are on the verge of gigantic discoveries that may rewrite the entire story of the universe!"

"Yes," I agree. "It's a big thing—mighty big."

"It's the biggest thing of our time," he bellowed; "and it's ours, if those confounded earthquakes will only keep off."

I didn't answer that. I was looking at Maura. She was standing up, and her dryad breast was panting. She looked at me with frightened eyes, and then gazed wildly away across the water. We heard a strange sound—the wailing of fear and woe, the cries of frightened birds.

Maura made a step as if to dive. Then she hesitated, and flung out hands inviting me—a beautiful, heart-rending gesture. Oh, I wanted to go to her, but I knew it meant death, and I shook my head.

She cried out to me a poignant, appealing, warning sentence. The few words I could make out in it seemed to be "hungry monster," "dwells," "bowels of the ocean." She wanted me to flee from the anger of that monster to safety. I knew I could not escape as she wished me to, and I shook my head.

The wailing, the calling from the amphibian people, rose insistent, demanding. She gave one agonized look at me, uttered a despairing cry, hid her face in her slender arms, and vanished over the side.

Vampage and I stared at each other.

"She said," I muttered huskily, "something about the monster who dwells in the bowels of the ocean."

"The earthquake, of course," Vampage interrupted. "They know — they feel it coming. Better batten everything down, and be ready to cut the warp."

XIII

THE earthquake came less than an hour later.

I don't think I need to describe it. I know I don't want to describe it, because of what it was, because of what it meant.

It was worse than the upheaval that had uncovered the sunken cities of the dead world. We were tossed through a night and a day in a hell of water, with a great wind trying to blow us under. We ought to have been killed. I don't know why we weren't, and I don't know how we weren't.

Exactly what happened is a mystery. All I know is that as the earth split and gaped, and engulfed the land that was known as the Wahine Rock, we were somehow caught and tossed out of immediate danger by the raging sea that poured across the vanishing land.

Why we didn't shatter against some rock, some projecting portion of the solid old houses, I don't know. I sometimes think we were too insignificant to be destroyed. We simply floated like a microscopic chip on the raging flood. We were whirled and tossed in every direction, but we floated.

Three days later we were still floating, but not quite so well. In fact, the seams had opened again, and the schooner was gaining water at a pace that made our pumping, agonized work though it was, look useless.

However, things were different. Whereas for two days we had been upon a starkly empty ocean, now we were wondering whether the tramp steaming toward us would reach us first, or the schooner sink first. Needless to say, since you are reading this plain narrative, the tramp won.

The steamer had caught the edge of the earthquake disturbance, but the skipper could tell us nothing. He thought it to have been just an ordinary storm.

As he was making for the Chile coast, we had to wait in what patience we could. It wasn't a first-class patience. My notebook with the vocabulary had been reduced to pulp in the storm, and Vampage was nearly out of his wits at finding that the greatest discovery of the age, which had been ours to grasp, had been snatched away.

Perhaps I felt with him, but I don't know. I feel that my own anxiety was a personal one. It was not the loss of a dead history, but of a living entity, that filled me with anxiety.

I needn't draw out the agony. We discovered, as every one who reads newspapers knows, that the earthquakes had been the worst ever known in that region, and that the Peruvian and Chilean coast had suffered horribly, and also the islands far out in the Pacific. We sat quaking as the press gave us daily information of shore lines changed and communities wiped out.

Then came the news we had expected and feared—just a short paragraph, a report from a ship surveying the damage of the earthquake. That paragraph ended our hopes. It told us about the Wahine Rock. It told us that there was now no Wahine Rock.

The Wahine had vanished entirely. The last terrestrial foothold of that unknown race had at last sunk beneath the sea. It was gone. It was wiped out. No longer would it be entered on charts, even as a reef.

Vampage is inconsolable. It left him broken to have that wonderful chance of a lifetime, that tremendous contribution to history and archæology, wiped out at a single sweep.

I am inconsolable, too—not because of that dead history, but because of a living girl.

Maura! I wonder about her. Was she killed? Was her race exterminated? Or do she and her people skim the undersea levels, slender, beautiful, mystic, keeping alive in the minds of frightened men the mystery and the terror of the legend of the Sirens?

I wonder if Maura still haunts South Sea beaches looking for me. If I only knew, I know where I would go.

THE END

WHEN SPRING COMES BACK

The brook is choked with yellow leaves,
Acorns and rifled chestnut burrs;
Summer is gathered up in sheaves,
Another year joins the old years.

So short a time ago the spring
Came laughing through the April rain,
The credulous heart did naught but sing,
And painted hopes sailed by again.

Ah, what a year it was to be
Of purpose ripening in the sun!
And what a year of love, said we;
And now the year is almost done.

Little is ours of it to spend—
Some sapless days of glory reft,
The heart so shadowed by the end,
It hath no joy in what is left.

Yea, naught remains but as before
To dream, the waiting winter through,
That, when the spring comes back once more,
Next year—ah, next!—but what of you?

Richard Leigh

The Tainted Woman

A STORY OF MODERN LIFE IN THE INTERNATIONAL PLAYGROUND OF THE RIVIERA

By Vance Thompson

Author of "The Man of the Miracle," "Eat and Grow Thin," etc.

OPPOSITE the railway station in Mentone, Torpichen saw the lights of a café, and pulled up his motor car. He took a seat at a table outside the café and ordered a bottle of Vichy. His throat was parched with the thirst born of anger.

"Confound the fellow!" he said.

There was no one at the iron tables on the terrace. The waiter who served him had gone away. His chauffeur was waiting patiently in the car. It was of what had happened in Monte Carlo, half an hour before, that Torpichen was thinking, with anger that had not quite burned itself out.

It was not what he had lost or won. He was fairly indifferent to money excitement of that sort. Of course he played now and again, because on the Riviera one does play now and again, for no particular reason, good or bad; but gaming did not interest him very much.

What he was thinking about was the row—the vulgar row—that had been forced upon him by an exasperated gamester outside the Casino. The fellow looked like a gentleman, too. He was well dressed, and spoke good French, but there was a Slavic snarl in his pronunciation of it—the Russian snarl. Doubtless he had been losing at the tables, and merely wanted to work off his ill humor on the first man he met.

"But why on me?" Torpichen asked himself.

It was a foolish brawl. When the fellow thrust into him, and spat out several oaths in place of an apology, Torpichen, with quick anger, caught him by the shoulder and hurled him back on the lawn. He could still see the handsome, savage face as it reeled backward in the glare of the electric light—the fierce eyes and the bared teeth.

That was all. The fellow got slowly to his feet, but made no motion of attack or retreat. He merely stood there—then bent and picked up his hat. With a laugh, Torpichen turned away. Already a crowd was gathering. Easily enough the brawl might grow into a scandal; and that would hardly be pleasant, he thought, with Betty Demdyke coming.

He picked up his motor car in front of the hotel. Fortunately it was waiting, and Marwick had everything in readiness. Torpichen had meant to motor back to San Remo that night, in any case. A little earlier, a little later, what did it matter?

By this time the Vichy had cooled his throat and drowned his anger. He was in a mood to laugh at himself, as he rapped on the table to summon the waiter to pay his score.

But the waiter did not appear.

Instead, a dingy figure lurched toward him from the shadows of the road. At first he could hardly define it. Then he made out that it was a man, all hair and rags, hugging under one arm a shapeless canvas bundle. He was a tall man, in spite of his drooping shoulders. His ragged clothes had once been khaki-colored. Long hair, of almost the same shade, fell on his neck and straggled out from under his cap. A thick, unkempt beard covered half his face. An abject creature, and yet somehow, as he stood there in his dirty helplessness, he was not without a touch of pathos.

Torpichen knew the type. They are scattered all over Europe, these wastrels washed out of Russia by revolution and famine. Everywhere they wander, without

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courage, without future—with only fading memories of the mocking glories of past days.

The man and the bundle! In the bundle would be a wad of greasy papers in unreadable languages, stamped with meaningless *visas* of vanished nations, more rags, pieces of string, and perhaps a hunk of stale bread—the common viaticum of unending vagabondage.

Torpichen spoke first. He was touched with pity for this broken man, and, although his words were flippant, there was kindness in his voice.

" You are a mournful-looking traveler," he said; " but cheer up—the first hundred years are always the worst! Have a drink? Vodka, old son?"

The vagabond shook his head.

" It's not that," he said at last.

" Perhaps it is this," Torpichen remarked good-naturedly.

He had in his hand some paper money, which he had taken out to pay his bill, and he pushed it across the table. The vagabond looked at it and seemed to hesitate, but after a moment he shook his head once more.

" No, it is not that," he repeated; " but if you will help me—"

" Well? What is it?"

" I must go to Italy."

" Nothing more? That is simple enough. Walk straight up that road, keep going, and there you are. That's Italy, over there."

" I've been turned back, there and everywhere. I can't get across the frontier. My papers—what are my passports and papers worth now? I am a Russian. Do you know what that means? It means that I have no country." Half to himself, he added: " The dogs have devoured it—the dogs of revolution that gnaw the bones of kings."

It was as if he was repeating a litany. In spite of his hairiness and dilapidation, and his air of helpless squalor, there was something tragic about him as he stood there, staring into an unseen world, where, seemingly, dire things were being done.

" Sorry!" Torpichen said. " It's bad, I know, but what can I do?"

The vagabond's suggestion was startling.

" You have a big car there," he whispered persuasively. " In the back of it, covered by those rugs, no one would think of looking for—me!"

Torpichen laughed grimly.

" They'll not have the chance," he declared bluntly. " I'm not smuggling Russkis into Italy. No, old son! You'll have to pad the hoof or fly across; but this may help you out—take it!"

It was quite a sum of money, but again the vagabond, after a momentary hesitation, refused.

" No, it is not that," he said once more.

He glanced furtively to right and left, and then, silently as he had come, backed away into the night.

" When a fellow like that won't take money," Torpichen told himself, " there's something wrong with him!"

He hammered on the iron table, but still the waiter did not come. Inside, the café was noisy with laughter and high-pitched voices and clattering glass. He shouted, but evidently his voice did not carry through, for it was his chauffeur who answered the call.

" Want me, sir? Nasty little place, this," he remarked in a friendly way. He was a chubby man, short in the leg, but he carried himself with dignity, and held his head up when he talked. He had noticed the vagabond, and gave his opinion. " Extraordinary fellow, sir! I saw you talking to him. I know that sort. He's a Russky. He'd have a knife into you like one o'clock if your back was turned. You can never trust a foreigner, sir."

Torpichen laughed.

" You seem to forget that so far as you are concerned, Marwick, I'm a foreigner myself — and far away from Broadway; but let's carry on."

He left some money on the table, and they went back together to the car. It was Torpichen who drove, while the chauffeur sat in the seat beside him. The big car picked up its speed and swung along the curving road toward Italy.

In the many weeks he had been idling on the Riviera, Torpichen had made the journey frequently. He and his big mouse-colored car and his chauffeur were so well known at the frontiers that it had become a mere formality to glance at his passport with its comprehensive *visa:*

Pour tous pays.
Valable six mois.
Aller et retour.

The French officials gave him a pleasant good night, as they sent him on his way. When he pulled up at the Italian station, he found himself in a battle of voices, oaths, arguments, and waving lanterns. The officials were shouting, but above the clamor they made Torpichen distinguished a shrill voice raised in angry protest.

"I think I know that pleasant voice," he said, "and that temper!"

Beyond a doubt it was the ruffled gamester who had affronted him in Monte Carlo. The fellow was still snarling in his high-pitched, Slavic way. He was standing beside his motor car—a low, long-gutted torpedo, dyed bright yellow, like the hair of an actress. Half a dozen officials were pawing it over, throwing out the traveling bags and rugs, opening everything that could be opened or pried apart. A chief inspector was apologizing sarcastically, as he examined the passport.

"Prince Kurokin, eh? Very sorry, prince. It is quite in order, but we had instructions to be on the lookout to-night. It's all right. You can go on immediately, prince."

The other officials laughed, and their laughter was not nice. One gets back from an Italian precisely what one gives him. Courtesy and a smile are met with smiling courtesy. Truculent ill humor—as Prince Kurokin had discovered—is paid back with interest.

The inspectors had left his car in dire disorder. It was their way of getting even for the insolence he had displayed; and they stood watching him with complete enjoyment as he fumed over the job of getting his possessions stowed away. At last he drove off, pursued by derisive laughter.

It was all very puerile and silly, but it amused Torpichen immensely. There was something very Italian about this conspiracy to harry the ill-tempered foreigner—a son of the barbarians—who had come blustering up to the gateway of their sacred country.

Besides, Torpichen had had his own little quarrel with that swaggering son of exile. He rather enjoyed witnessing this Italian vengeance.

He was leaning forward in the light, smiling with perfect approval, when the inspector came toward him. It was his smile that brought an answering smile to the dark Italian face.

"Ah, it is you, *Signor Americano!* You saw him? A brute beast! A barbarian!" said the inspector, throwing out his hands in a wide gesture of contempt.

"You served him jolly well right," Torpichen answered, laughing.

"You saw him, yes?" The inspector waved aside the American passport, and motioned him to go on his way. "Good fortune—good night!"

Torpichen was still laughing as he sent the car forward, but there was no sign of mirth on Marwick's round face. Nothing in the incident at the frontier struck him as being amusing. They were all foreigners, and they had all acted like foreigners. What else was there to expect of them? Even Torpichen, he thought, might have shown more dignity; but there it was again—the foreigner in him coming out. Marwick kept his thoughts to himself.

It was a night without moon or stars, and, after Bordighera, they had the road to themselves. In spite of the curves and spirals of the way, Torpichen drove fast. He wondered why he had not overtaken Prince Kurokin's yellow torpedo, for he knew he had the speed of it. It must have turned off somewhere, he decided, for when he reached San Remo he had seen nothing of it.

The seaside town of San Remo was still awake, late as was the hour. Lights gleamed from the Casino and from the big hotels and villas.

"I'll drive around to the garage," Torpichen said.

The garage was behind his hotel, under the shoulder of the hill. It occupied one side of a short, broad street, new-paved and electric-lighted, while opposite it a dark lane opened and went twisting up to the old town, between windowless houses and crumbling walls. The new street lay like a neutral zone between the modern world of fashion and idleness along the seashore and the age-old mystery of ancient San Remo—that tragic mass of buildings piled in confusion on the hills above.

Torpichen pulled up the car and got out.

"Good night, Marwick," he said.

"Good night, sir."

As Torpichen paused to light a cigarette, the doors of the garage swung open, pouring out a flood of light. He threw down the match, set his heel on it, and walked slowly toward the avenue.

At that moment he heard a shout—an oath—from Marwick. He turned in time to see a tall figure rise in the back of the car—a shapeless thing wrapped in rugs. Then the rugs were tossed aside, and the vagabond, infamous with hair and rags, leaped to the ground.

At first he seemed dazed, like a wild beast abruptly dragged into the light. He darted this way and that, crouching, hugging his filthy bundle. Suddenly, as if it were a burrow, he dashed into the stone lane toward the blackness and mystery of the old town.

The vagabond had crossed the frontier of his destiny.

II

TORPICHEN had risen late in the day after his midnight ride to San Remo. He had friends enough, but he was in no mood for talk or golf, for horses or women, and he swung off for a tramp through the hills. He had luncheon in a little stone village clinging to the mountainside, and made his way homeward through narrow mule paths, twisting down beneath the olives.

He came out at last on a road he did not know, and saw, unexpectedly, the city and sea; and suddenly he was aware of its beauty.

In front of him the sea stretched away from Capo Verde, with its white sanctuary of Our Lady of the Guard, to Monte Corvi. Above it rose the triangle of San Remo, sheltered by its seven hills—old hills terraced with vine and olive, and shadowed with crumbling temples and towers.

He sat there on a stone bench by the wayside, and, for a while, he was very still. It was as if the pagan South, which glowed and shone all about him, had laid some sort of spell upon him. The rich vegetation, the acrid odor of plants and trees, woke all his pantheistic instincts. He felt a kind of affinity with the trees, and the languor of the vineyards. The magic of the South, which is woven of silence and fertility, of the palpitation and color of things, enveloped him; and his mood was one of quiet content.

The air was very still. The smoke of Torpichen's cigarette rose almost straight, sketching faint arabesques, mysterious as the lines of a hand. His sense of quietude deepened. Life, for him, seemed to be flowing like a little stream of water, peaceful and clear.

Even as he shaped this image—it was his habit to think in pictures—a sense of expectancy came upon him. It was not fear; it was not apprehension; it was that more terrifying thing—foreknowledge.

"The wild geese are honking!" he said softly.

He was no fool. He knew that nothing happens, even to the simplest man going blindly about his business, which has not been signaled to him again and again, with outcries and warnings.

Events never happen singly. They advance, he would say, like wild geese, in a flying squadron. One leads, and the others follow in a spreading wedge. Events, whether of the spiritual world or of the material world, call to one another at birth, with shrill cries. The fortunate events summon one another, and evil omen calls to evil omen. They rush together from the outposts of space, emerge from the caves of earth, fall headlong from the peaks of the moon—to the eternal stupefaction of the simple-minded man, who has never forseen anything, never expected anything.

"The wild geese are honking!" Torpichen repeated.

More than once he had had these premonitions, and he had learned to heed them. Everything, he would say, means something. A stranger who jostles you as you pass, a beggar who cries to you in the night, the flight of a bird—everything means something, if one could only read its meaning.

Torpichen did not get up. He hardly shifted his position. Indeed, the only movement he made was to drop his cigarette and extinguish it.

The stone bench on which he sat was shaded by an old palm tree, grotesque, monstrous, with scales like some prehistoric fish. Leaning back against the tree, he was as motionless as if he were part of it. He glanced to right and left. On one side, the highway curved down toward the hotels and the sea; on the other, a narrow road skirted a ravine and struck off toward the old town of San Remo.

In the angle formed by the two roads he saw the villa.

Why had he not seen it before? It was as if only at this appointed instant of time it had come out of some cloud of mystery and disclosed itself; but now it was there, four square, thrusting itself at him.

It was a flat, drab-colored house of stucco, with balconies and verandas and pillars. Everything about it—even the fat, naked cupids sprawling on the balustrade—was a stucco sham, a lie that looks like stone. It was mean and pompous and false, like some old hag painted to look like youth.

The garden in which the villa stood was surrounded by high walls. Torpichen had a fair view of it through the lofty iron gates. The gates were older, he thought, than the house, for the ironwork of them was curious and beautiful, rough with marks of the hammer. They had been beaten out, evidently, in the forge of a good workman's fancy, and their honesty mocked the stucco sham of the pillars and the sprawling cupids.

On either side of the gateway a cypress grew, towering and black. The garden itself was unkempt and lawless, and extended, Torpichen could see, to the abrupt ravine that inclosed two sides of it. What he could glimpse of it appeared to be less a garden than a tropical jungle of bamboos and tree ferns and giant grasses, through which rose the swords of the yuccas.

Along the wall a climbing fig tree spread its dark branches. There were other trees lining the white path, while beyond and nearer the ravine grew a tall Judas tree. It caught and held the young man's attention, for, although not a breath of air was stirring, its red-lined leaves were never for a moment still. They whispered and murmured together, moving mysteriously, as things move in the dark.

In this muttering conspiracy of the red leaves of the Judas tree there seemed to be something sinister and menacing; and Torpichen sat there, listening, waiting for he knew not what—for his premonition—for the honking of the wild geese.

From the narrow road a little dog came up furtively and paused. Then it ran swiftly across the highway, stirring up the white dust, and halted at the gates of the villa.

A man followed the dog, halted where the dog had paused, and then swiftly crossed the road. He was a short, slender, darkling figure of a man, in greenish clothes, and with a slouching hat, such as the peasants wear. Though he was erect and lithe, and stepped lightly, he gave the impression that in some way he was deformed and unnatural—as unnatural as a wild animal in cap and breeches. He had thick black hair, and black eyes that flashed under the rim of his old hat as if they reflected the sunlight.

For a while he peered through the gates, inspecting the garden and the shuttered windows of the house. At last, as if satisfied with what he had seen, he pulled the bell handle and set a bell jangling. After that he waited patiently, the little dog crouching in the dust at his feet, until the front door of the villa opened and a butler appeared, looked at him insolently, and finally called out:

"Hey! What do you want?"

"Come and see."

"You be off about your business!" the big servant shouted. "You be off!"

The butler came briskly down the steps and along the path, as if he meant to take measures to enforce his orders.

The short man glanced over his shoulder, and from his lips there came a queer whistling sound. It was not the call of a bird, and yet there was in it something of the woodland wild calling to the wild.

As if it had been some sort of signal, a man came stealthily up from the road by the ravine. Torpichen stared with amazement. It was the vagabond who had stolen across the midnight frontier in his car.

Half dazed, fantastic, disreputable in his rags, the clean sunlight seemed to lend a new kind of infamy to this wretched outcast, emphasizing the degraded aspect of his discolored hair, of his matted beard, which covered his face to the cheek bones, and of his dirty, gesticulating hands. Otherwise he was just as Torpichen had seen him at the little café in Mentone, except that he was without the bundle that he had hugged so carefully during the adventure of the night.

The tattered clothes still bore every stain of wayfaring and weather. The long hair still straggled out under his hat. No—there was no change in his outward appearance; and yet Torpichen soon became conscious of a very radical change in the man himself. Just what it was he could not at first define; and then he saw that the vagabond's eyes were no longer wavering and furtive. They were wide open, fixed, glittering with excitement.

The fellow was breathing hard, either from weakness or passion. He steadied himself by clutching the iron bars with both hands, and clung there.

By this time the butler was at the gate.

"So there are two of you!" he exclaimed. "Well, be off with you, I say!"

Suddenly the insolence died out of him. He drew back at sight of the gaunt figure, with its terrible eyes, staring as if to drag the soul out of his body. The voice that came from it was harsh and imperative:

"Open the gate! You hear?"

The servant's mouth gaped with astonishment. This insolence from a wretched beggar was a bit too much. Indignation choked him.

"Open!" the vagabond repeated, shaking the iron gates in a frenzy that seemed half rage and half despair.

It was then that the butler found voice.

"Out of here, you damned beggar!" he shouted, adding a word of obloquy which is never printed in any language.

The result was so unexpected that it brought Torpichen to his feet. It was as if he were seeing, before his very eyes, one human being abruptly transforming himself into another and quite a different person. It was something miraculous, like water changing itself to wine. He watched the scene as if spellbound.

The vagabond stepped back a pace and drew himself up to his full height—Torpichen saw he was a tall man—and all the weakness and passion fell away from him. It was as if his agitation had been a cloak, which he suddenly let fall to the ground, disclosing the real man who had been disguised in it. He stood there towering, implacable, silent—and in his silence there was something more menacing than anything that words or oaths could convey. He stared down at the flunky with his cold eyes.

When at last he spoke, his voice was level and calm—deadly calm.

"I've had quite enough of this," he said. "Remember, I will permit no further insolence of any kind. Go at once to your master, and tell him I desire to see him without delay."

The instinct of cowardice, which watches over a flunky's destiny and keeps him out of danger, had warned the butler that he was treading a perilous path. There was a certain compromise in the half respectful tone that he used in reply.

"My master is not at home," he said, politely enough. Then, as his glance took in the vagabond's scarecrow rags, he added, as if in spite of himself: "And he wouldn't see you if he was."

"He will see me if you—"

"I tell you he is not here."

"Then he will be here very soon, and when he comes he will see me. Do you understand?"

"I understand my orders, and they are not to admit your sort. Orders are orders, and it's my business to obey them."

"Very well, but my business is with your master. Tell him that."

"All right," returned the butler negligently, turning on his heel and moving toward the house.

"Come back here!" the vagabond ordered. Though he did not raise his voice, there was an intensity in it that jerked the flunky around as if he had been hauled by a taut cord. "You will give your master this from me."

Opening his coat at the breast, the vagabond drew from a pocket in his canvas shirt a small oblong package tied with a string. He held it out through the bars of the gate. The butler, after a slight hesitation, took it gingerly, balanced it for a moment, and then, laying it on the palm of his open hand, inspected it as if it were some peculiarly unpleasant kind of insect, which nevertheless fascinated him.

"You understand that it is for your master. Give it to him as soon as he returns—remember!"

Without a word, with merely a sullen shrug of his shoulders, the servant turned and walked toward the house. It was not until he had gone in and shut the door that the vagabond moved. Then, suddenly, as if all the will power in him had turned to water, he shrank back into the shambling, uncertain thing he had been—a thing of rags and dirt and feebleness that was an insult to the light of day. He laid his hand on the peasant's shoulder, and the two men moved away, their feet dragging in the dust. After them slouched the furtive dog.

They had not glanced toward the bench where Torpichen lingered half concealed by the old tree. Without looking back, in silence, they shuffled down the road that skirted the ravine and led toward the old town and the seven hills of San Remo.

Torpichen watched them until they were out of sight, around the bend of the road. Then he looked once more at the mysterious villa, with its closed doors and shuttered windows, and its brooding air of ill omen. There was silence, unbroken even by the cry of a bird—silence that would have been absolute had it not been for the ceaseless muttering of the red-leaved Judas tree.

As he went his way toward the promenade by the sea, Torpichen found that, going with him, was a haunting memory of the silent house and the red tree, of the peasant with his half human signal, of the furtive dog in the dust, and of the vagrom man who had thrust himself into a life that had been, hitherto, peaceful enough. What were they to him? What the deuce had he to do with this brawl at the iron gates? Who could tell?

"The wild geese are flying," he said to himself once more, and laughed.

These events coming one after the other—streaming past him as the wild geese stream overhead—were they winged omens of what the future held for him?

At that moment he looked up and saw the woman.

She was coming toward him from the glory of the public gardens, and behind her lay the blue silk of the shimmering sea. She walked slowly, swinging in her naked hand a great bunch of scarlet iris flowers. As she drew near, she gave him her eyes for a moment. They were gay and good, but there was malice in her smile.

When she had passed, he turned and watched her — the rhythmic and carnal body, the red amber of her hair, the long white hand, and the wanton glow of the iris. His eyes were cynical as he gazed.

III

The midwinter crowd, as usual, was parading up and down the promenade from the pastry cook's shop at the corner to the far end of the Giardino Pubblico, taking the sunlight and the sea air.

It was a pilgrim world gathered from all the white continents. There were Americans of the North and the South, English walking for digestion, soft-stepping Latins, new Germans thrusting about and quite unaware of their absurdity, new Slavs wearing humility as if it were a garment.

Torpichen, sitting in the shade, watched them idly. He had walked far that day, and was glad to rest his long legs—glad, also, to rest his thoughts, which had been busy with omens.

It was pleasant enough to watch the particolored crowd as it made shifting patterns on the paths. He noticed, perhaps for the first time, how singularly lacking in reticence humanity really is. Each one of these people, he thought, might just as well have been wearing a label, like the figures in the comic newspaper pictures. They had known the hazards of life, and their look, their walk, their carriage, told the story.

It was odd that he had never noticed it before, but perhaps that was because he had always been part of the crowd, while to-day he felt aloof from it; and now that he was a mere onlooker, they all seemed to be giving themselves away. All of them—the handsome Italian officers in the pride of their blue; pathetic old gentlemen dragging legs that would never dance again; muscular girls, white-shod, shower-bathed, high-headed before the adversary, man; and those other women who coughed, held handkerchiefs to their lips, and lived in an odor of creosote. Hunters for health or pleasure, they were all giving themselves away.

There was the old diplomat, gray of hair and eye and mustache, with the jowls of a flesh eater. It was plain enough now to Torpichen, in his new mood of perceptivity, that old Sir Humphrey's face was a witness against him. The obese banker rolling along beside him, talking with his hands—why, the fellow's mere gestures were an autobiography! The two of them looked as if they might have been something swept out, with the dust of the room, after a peace conference.

Giving themselves away!

A little donkey came ambling by, a velvet packsaddle on its spine, a brown-legged girl at its bridle. From the shadows of the garden two monks appeared—a Carthusian in the habit of his order, the whiteness of it corresponding symbolically to the resurrection of Our Lord, and a Benedictine, whose black robe figured the mystery of His death. They advanced gravely, their eyes bent on the ground, their lips moving.

Those two, Torpichen thought, were not giving themselves away. He wondered what dream, what tragedy of sacrifice, was hidden beneath the anonymous robes. Perhaps there was nothing to reveal — mere barren lives covered with sackcloth.

An imperative voice from a motor car hailed him, and a hand heavy with rings beckoned him.

"Andrew!"

It was the Princess Castelmare, massive, opulent, imperious. As she leaned out from the car, the beauty she displayed was that of a pouter pigeon. Torpichen hastened up to her.

"How d'ye do, princess?" he said, and touched the jeweled hand. Behind the glittering abundance of the princess he made out the lank head of the diplomat, whom she had evidently picked up. "How d'ye do, Sir Humphrey?" he added.

"I've only a moment, Andrew," the princess went on in her rapid, dominant way. Her accent proclaimed a youth spent in some strident Chicago. "I'm glad I saw you here. You know you are dining with me to-night. You haven't forgotten?"

"No, princess, how could I? So very glad to come—been looking forward to it."

"Then that's settled. Nine o'clock, or a quarter past. Don't be late. I don't know why you can never be on time, Andrew. I'm sure you've nothing to do."

"That's the reason, princess."

"It's a small dinner, but I'm so glad to give you a chance of meeting my *padre*—the baron, you know—and, of course, dear Sir Humphrey and Lady Milding—"

The princess interrupted herself long enough to bestow a large, firm smile on the old diplomat.

"Hugh Forbess came this afternoon," she went on. He has been in Scotland, and the Demdykes are staying on with his father, so we shall have all the news. I'm sure Betty is having the time of her life—"

"I'm glad of that," Torpichen interposed quietly.

"Nine o'clock, Andrew! I haven't another minute to give you."

Torpichen always wondered how so large and so imposing a woman could talk so fast and say so little. One would have expected her to speak with a gravity befitting the majesty of her appearance, but she always chattered, and her chatter was chiefly of people with titles and jewels and pedigrees.

"Good-by!"

"She's a fearsome old girl," Torpichen thought, as he strolled back to the shade and a chair.

He remembered her in his boyhood days, when she had been a handsome, pleasant enough sort of woman. She was his aunt, in a way, for in that conquering youth of hers she had married old Matt Bulmer, his great-uncle. That rugged old financier had covered her with jewels and paraded her around the world before he died—possibly of pride in his matrimonial achievement—and left her the rugged millions he was really forced to leave behind him when he departed. The widow had bustled her way through the world, marrying an Italian prince of the great Castelmare family. He, too, had gone his way to a quieter world, leaving her the splendor of his age-old title. And she had carried on, climbing—cleaving her way with a gold battle-ax. She was indeed a fearsome lady!

The crowd began to drift away. It was the hour for cakes and tea. In the casino an orchestra, which no merely human power could prevent from playing Puccini, struck up.

It was a curious thing about Torpichen that he did not like music—not even bad music. He stood up and looked seaward. A white steam yacht lay outside the harbor. A motor boat shot past the Molo, and made for the yacht. Torpichen watched it, for movement always interested him.

Suddenly he heard a woman's laughter. It was laughter so blithe and human that he turned to see whence it came. The blond woman was parleying with the donkey drivers by the curb — brown fellows with grinning mouths—and once more she laughed aloud. Involuntarily Torpichen took a step toward her. Then he halted and looked at her with open curiosity.

He noticed her white dress, the big white hat with the jasper-headed pins stuck in it, the pelt of a white fox hanging over one shoulder, and the scarlet iris flowers swaying in her hand. She was a slender, long-limbed woman. Her hair was red amber. As she stood there, stroking the head of a shaggy donkey, jesting with the red-capped boys, she made a wonderfully bright and winsome picture.

Turning a little, she faced Torpichen. For the second time their eyes met and did not release each other.

She smiled a little, as very young children smile. Her eyes still in his eyes, she came and stood in front of him.

He spoke first.

"Which way shall we walk?" he asked in a matter-of-fact way.

"I don't care—anywhere," she answered. She was perfectly at ease. There was a bit of mockery in her upturned face as she added: "You want me to decide? This way, then!"

They strolled through the Giardino Pubblico and out along the white road. A great wall went with them on their right, and over the top of it showed the daggers of the yuccas. On the other side of the road was the gloom of the cemetery, where enormous cypresses threw their shadows over the marble tombs.

" You must take me there," she said. " I love cemeteries."

" Now?"

" Some other day."

So there was to be another day! He was not quite sure; but what did it matter? To-day was to-day.

She smiled up at him. Her eyes were so fresh a blue, it seemed to him, that she might be using them for the first time. The blue sky mirrored itself in them. Surely nothing evil had ever passed in those innocent depths!

They reflected space, the pure sky, life eternal; and yet there was something else—Torpichen could not define it. For all their candor, her eyes were haunted by some obscure and obstinate dream.

" Well?" she asked. " Have you reached a conclusion? Am I pretty?"

" Worse than that," he replied gravely.

" But am I?"

" Yes. You would be a terrible woman to love!"

" Fortunately, you needn't think of that, need you?" she answered lightly, and quickened her steps.

Before he overtook her, he had printed upon his mind a memory so indelible that he knew it had become a permanent possession, not to be lost in the years. It was a memory of the torquoise sea and the white road and the glory of the sunlight in which she walked—and of her laughter. She laughed like the soul of his race.

" I am a pagan," she told him.

" You are an Aryan," he replied. " You are good and gay, like the race of Aryans, born and to be born. Laughter is your blood heritage."

From the instant of their meeting Torpichen carried himself with the air of an old acquaintance. She, on her part, had met the situation without the slightest embarrassment. They had stepped into an immediate understanding. Instinctively they had attained, in a manner not quite clear, a frank sense of comradeship.

They walked along the white road by the sea, each trying to please the other.

Now and then a carriage passed, drawn by little Ligurian ponies, with nodding plumes in their bridles; or an automobile in a cloud of dust.

" Who are you?" she asked suddenly.

" You really want to know?"

" Yes, I think I do. It might be interesting, if you talked honestly—but would you? That's the only thing I don't like about being a woman—we can't get the truth out of you."

" Perhaps, if you got it," he said, " you might not like it. All may be for the best."

" No, no!" she answered quickly. " I shouldn't mind what it was, so long as it was really true — just what you meant! Sometimes I think I am dying of hunger for real things and real people."

" You must be lonely."

" You think so?" She looked at him with eyes that darkened a little, and then went on more lightly: " No, I am interested in every one, and I am particularly interested "—she smiled up at him—" in you. It is quite true. I am interested in you, and in that old woman in the doorway, and the man up there digging among the vines. Do you see that man? What shoulders! I should like to talk to him, and to listen while he told me all about his life."

" Vampirish, isn't it?"

" What a monstrous thing to say!"

" By way of symbol only," Torpichen explained. " You know the vampire is supposed to take a great deal of interest in other people's lives. In fact, it lives on them."

She stopped suddenly, and turned and looked at him—a frequent trick of hers, he was to discover—with narrow and suspicious eyes. There was a blue flame in them like an alcohol flame, cold and equivocal. Torpichen wondered what enigma in her life he had touched upon by a chance word. He gave no sign of understanding, and met her look with friendly candor.

" What is it?" he asked.

Of a sudden she smiled, and took again her look of a little girl, shallow and gay and good.

" Really and truly I am interested in you," she said.

" I'm glad you are."

" That's nice of you not to say anything silly. It isn't personal "—she paused reflectively—" or is it? You see, it's like this. I am curious about everything. I can never see a little box without wanting to open it. It is the same with men and women."

" And donkeys and donkey boys," Torpichen interposed, laughing. " I couldn't help seeing you. It was charming. Ah!" he exclaimed. " Now I know—"

" What?"

Again her eyes narrowed.

"Why, I have been thinking of you in terms of light—of sunshine and fire—"

"That's nice of you," she interposed, satisfied.

"I should like to call you Atar. You remember? She was a daughter of the sun goddess, but she wouldn't stay in the sky. She came down to live on the smoky hearths, near men and women."

"Yes—I would have done that. What was her name?"

They turned out of the highway into a bridle path that wound up the hills. After a time, during which neither of them spoke, they sat down in the lean shade of an olive tree.

He openly admired her—the faint reds in her cheeks, the white tones of her ears and temples and throat, and, above all, her hair—more than anything else, her hair. It was abundantly copper and gold, with here and there the light of amber in it. Her forehead was broad and low. Her mouth was not very small, and her lips were full, delicately fashioned but strong, as if they could endure devastating kisses. Her eyes were marvelously blue—blue as the sky in some old saga of the North—unqualified blue. They were open upon Torpichen at that moment, studying his face, observing—

She was a slender woman, lithe and long of limb, with graceful wrists and ankles. Beneath the thin gown he could discern the round knees and the delicate curves of her strong, clean body. She gave him an impression of something close to nature, splendidly animal, hungry, swift-burning and exultant with life. Not Atar, herself, he thought, was nearer to the source of being.

He lifted his eyes to her face once more. She was smiling faintly, like a pleased child.

"You like me?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And my hair?"

"Let me see it."

She drew out the jasper-headed pins, gave them to him to hold, and laid her hat on the stone beside her. Then, with one swift gesture, she let down her abundant hair.

It fell in waves of copper and amber and brass to her knees, shrouding her body. It was a flood of flame, in which Torpichen wondered how many lovers had bathed!

Then he had a sudden vision of her past, very actual, inexorably precise, but what did it matter? Surely he of all men had done with this kind of folly! Yes, for him—and he thanked God—that sort of thing was over, for no *Circe* in all the world would he go on all fours and crunch the acorns of unclean love. No and no and no, he repeated in his heart, and thanked God.

A strange perfume, mystic, hallucinate, came from her torrential hair as she swept it back over her head and then drew it down so that it framed her young face. Her blue eyes were bright and ardent. He leaned toward her until her shoulder touched his breast, and for a long time they sat there in silence.

Some kind of wild life stirred in the trees overhead. On a gray stone wall a swift darting lizard posed for them. It was the sun lizard worshiping his departing god.

"I must go," she murmured lazily.

Slowly she gathered up her hair and coiled it on her head. He gave her the hat and jasper pins; then he stooped and lifted her to her feet.

"You are strong!" she whispered.

"Yes."

"Come—you know how quickly the dark comes on. I must get back."

She ran lightly down the path. He picked up the spray of flowers that she had left at the foot of the olive tree, and, running swiftly, overtook her.

"Which way are we going?" he inquired.

"I live in the Berigo. I'll show you a short cut. You shall come with me to the house, say good night, very nicely, and go away."

"Until—"

"No—to-day is complete in itself. It is like a little box. We have put some pleasant hours in it — haven't we? — and now the lid is falling. The little box is almost shut."

"Every day is another day."

"Perhaps," she assented carelessly.

They walked rapidly, as if darkness were weighing upon them. Night was fast closing in over the hills and the sea. The stars were faint and few. They spoke now and then, but words did not seem to be necessary. Their understanding was based upon something deeper than mere human speech.

Occasionally he took her hand, to steady her where the way was rough. She would let her hand linger a moment in his, and then release it very gently. For Torpichen it was as if he were walking in a night of brooding enchantment, through an unreal world. Nothing was real, except her presence, whitely visible in the dusk, and the spell she had laid upon him.

They came out on an unlighted road, bordering a ravine. Before long it curved sharply and brought them to a pair of shadowy gates. She touched his arm and checked him.

"I am home now," she said gently, as if the quiet of the night were too mysteriously beautiful to be broken save by a whisper. "It has been very good of you, and you have been nice from beginning to end. Good night!"

He could make out the gates, and, beyond, trees and a grayish mass that loomed up like a house.

She gave him her hand. He held it fast, and drew her toward him. She laughed softly, and, leaning away from him, turned an electric switch set in the gatepost.

It was as if the whole world had changed, so fierce a light leaped up, tearing across the night, flooding the road and the paths, beating upon the villa, with its pillars and balconies and cupids and flaming windows, inundating the tangled jungle of a garden, with the Judas tree rising naked in the light and its red leaves dancing together.

Torpichen reeled back, his eyes blinded by the sudden glare, and also by a vague blindness in his mind. An enchantress's wand might have done this thing, evoking out of darkness and silence this fantastic world of light. No doubt she would vanish into its radiance as dreams hide themselves in daylight!

Home?

It was her home—here, where he had seen the evil faces and heard the voices of menace and anger—the vagabond's outcry and the dark little fellow who spat in the dust—here!

"Come away!" he wanted to say. "You must not go in. Terrible things are in there. Come away!" But he could find no words.

There were hurrying footsteps on the gravel path. The iron gates swung open. He heard the butler's deferent voice. They were talking Italian.

"*Signora,*" the servant said.

"Again good night!"

Once more she gave Torpichen her hand. The warmth of it seemed to sink into his own cold hand—to sink into it and to run through all his veins.

"I—I can't say good night to you!" he whispered.

She turned away, and, laughing, sped up the shining path to the house. Then the lights in the garden went out, leaving him in violent and sudden darkness.

IV

THE telephone bell rang loudly, perhaps for the second time.

Torpichen was lying on the couch in his room at the hotel, staring up at the ceiling, painting there pictures of a woman among the olive trees, of a woman speeding up a radiant pathway to a house ablaze with magic light, always of a woman—of her eyes and hair and mouth.

He tore himself away from these dream pictures, and reluctantly went over to the telephone.

"Yes! Who is it?"

Then, in answer to the determined voice at the other end, he poured out apology and explanation.

"I've been detained, princess. I'm just off—please pardon me!"

It was nearly nine o'clock. He had forgotten all about his dinner engagement, and he was still in tweeds. He changed as rapidly as possible, but he was half an hour late when his motor car deposited him at the door of the princess's *palazzo.* In the drawing-room he repeated his apologies.

"It's quite all right, Andrew," the princess said. "I counted on your being late. You always are. That's why I telephoned. You know Lady Milding?"

Yes, he knew Lady Milding, and her jade ornaments, and her round, bulbous eyes, and her meaningless round face. He knew Sir Humphrey, her husband, with his mask of an old diplomat; and this was Hugh Forbess—yes.

"How d'ye do?"

"How d'ye do?"

They were tall men, both. Torpichen was rather dark, upstanding, virile, giving an impression of nervous energy and outgoing life. Hugh Forbess, leaner of build, was a handsome man, gray of eye, with reddish hair and clean-cut features. They looked at each other for a moment, and, moved by a common impulse of sympathy, shook hands.

"*Padre,*" the princess was saying, "this is Andrew Torpichen."

Across the wide drawing-room there came striding a tall old man, square-shouldered, powerful, in a long black cassock that whipped his heels.

"Baron Testevi," the princess added; "but you, too, may call him *padre*."

Torpichen found his hand gripped, and the old Jesuit turned a smiling face on him. It was a good face to look upon, frank and sincere, but made fine and keen by the habit of thought. The gray eyes were both shrewd and kindly; and yet instinctively Torpichen felt a kind of antipathy to this impressive old man in his flapping robes of dingy black. He didn't look like a priest. He looked as if he should be leading a cavalry charge against a horde of black-skinned savages.

In spite of this antipathy, however, Torpichen walked at the *padre's* side as they went in to dinner. It was a small gathering—only the six of them—and they dined at a little table at one end of the huge dining room with windows looking out on the sea. It was a lofty and ornate room, marble and gilt and crystal, lighted with innumerable shallow bowls and a stream of yellow fire that ran around the cornices.

The princess did not love concealment. Her fifty years could still confront the light of day or of electric lamps. She loomed over the table. She was majestic. Her great white throat, her large shoulders and arms, gleamed with diamonds, and her fingers were covered with rings, as if old Matt Bulmer's wealth had rained down upon her in a shower of jewels.

She was always happy when the war paint lay thick upon her, and to-night she knew she was looking her best. The dominant face, with the high cheek bones and the square, heavy chin, wore a look of masterful content. She smiled at the *padre*, who sat on her left, at Sir Humphrey, on her right, and at Lady Milding, who faced her, between Torpichen and the grave, unsmiling Forbess.

She talked religion, even with the caviar. She had always been a religious woman, even in old Matt Bulmer's day. Indeed, it was in Torpichen's memory that she had had every religion, one after the other, that a nice woman can have. Her spiritual adventures had ranged through almost all the creeds. It was during a victorious experience of theosophy that she had married old Matt; but theosophy was not quite the thing, she knew, for the widow of the Prince Castelmare. Her Catholicism was now quite as much a part of her as her title, her palaces in Rome and San Remo, her house in Paris, and her flat in New York.

In her new zeal she had determined to add to the ten thousand churches of Italy another church which should ornately proclaim her piety to present and future generations. She talked of it to the *padre*, and he listened in silent approval.

When there came a pause in the conversation, the *padre* spoke across the table to Forbess.

"You'll be writing to your father soon?" he asked. "Then give him my love. We rarely write to each other now—not that we've lost interest in each other, but life for both of us, I dare say, is full of duties."

"He often speaks of you," Forbess replied. "Indeed, I've heard of you all my life, *padre*."

"I was Sir John Forbess's tutor," the priest explained, "when he was a boy—for many years and in many places. You are very like him. I would have known you for his son had I seen you in the street. Is he well?"

"Very well, thank you. He is always fit."

Lady Milding had found Torpichen easy to talk to, and had begun a feeble anecdote of Russia.

"We were there so many years. It was appalling! Such a dreadful country! Even now, when I dream of it"—she lowered her voice to a whisper—"I wake up screaming."

"It must indeed have been awful for you, those years in Russia," Torpichen said sympathetically.

"It was terrible," she went on in the same low voice. "There were dead everywhere—and so many of them our dear, dear friends! That was not the worst, for they, at least, were dead; but those who didn't die—think of those who didn't die!"

This low voice, hinting horrors, here at the bright dinner table, was ghastly.

"You should think of the help you were able to give, and of the good you did—you and Sir Humphrey," Torpichen said gently.

"Yes, we tried; and I don't think of it—only to-night it came back. I wonder why it came back to-night! Oh, it was so much worse when they were not dead!" She gave a sort of shudder. "I saw the château burning, and—"

Sir Humphrey's thin, level voice cut, as if with metal, into the recital she had just begun.

"You were saying, dear—"

Lady Milding looked up with a start.

"The Kurokins. I was telling Mr. Torpichen about the château, and—"

"Yes?" her husband interposed.

"And the three needles," she resumed tremulously.

"No, my dear, please!" Sir Humphrey said with cold finality. "You know that can't be told. It simply can't be told." To the others he explained: "Quite an awful atrocity, and the victims were the Kurokins. It is hard for my wife to forget, but it can't be told."

The diplomat's manner was polite enough, but it carried a certain air of reproof, and Lady Milding flushed. The other guests shared her embarrassment, and the hostess, always alert, came to her rescue. She made no reference to the "three needles," though she shared the curiosity of those who had heard the mysterious phrase; but she did not dismiss the Kurokins from the conversation. That, she thought, would have been too abrupt.

"You mentioned the Kurokins, Sir Humphrey. How interesting! You know the prince is here this season. Such a charming man! Related to the nicest people—all the Gotha, as we say. You must meet him, Andrew. I am sure you and he will be great friends."

"Prince Kurokin? But I have met him, dear aunt," Torpichen replied, with a grim smile, "and no longer ago than last night."

"Last night?"

"At Monte Carlo."

"I'm so glad, Andrew!"

"He wasn't. I knocked him down."

The *padre's* eyes twinkled, and Forbess laughed aloud. The horror on Lady Milding's face was tragic.

"You — knocked — him — down!" the princess gasped.

"Yes. He was rude, and a bit more than rude."

"He would be," the *padre* put in quietly. "I've noticed that there is a good deal of the savage in that man."

The princess was pleased to learn that the *padre* thought none the worse of her truculent nephew.

"On the contrary," the priest added, "I think the better of him."

"Still," the princess persisted, "one doesn't go about knocking people down, does one?"

"He fell soft, aunt," said Torpichen. "There was a nice piece of turf there. It's not worth talking about."

"If there isn't a scandal!"

"Nothing that that man can say or do," stated the *padre* decisively, "could injure Mr. Torpichen in any way. Kurokin's life is not quite what you think it is, princess—at least, I fear it is not."

"And I thought him so charming!"

The old diplomat put the subject away.

"Your yacht, isn't it, Forbess? I see she bears the white ensign. I watched her come in."

"Yes — I came overland to Marseilles and picked the yacht up there."

"You haven't told me how Betty is," the princess said.

"I am sure she is quite well," Forbess replied.

"My niece, you know — Betty Demdyke," the hostess explained. "She and my sister have been stopping with Sir John. Are they staying on?"

"For a few days. I think you may expect them in a week or so."

"Is Betty as pretty as ever?"

"She is the prettiest girl I ever saw," Forbess replied, his gray eyes kindling with admiration.

"There, Andrew! What about that?"

"I think Forbess has extremely good taste—and good judgment," Torpichen answered quietly; but he did not look at the young Englishman, and relapsed into moody silence.

During the rest of the dinner he spoke very little. Forbess, however, was almost eloquent, so long as he could keep the conversation upon Betty, or even upon Betty's mother, who seemed to be a sort of next best thing. He explained that Betty was very keen on yachting. That was why he had brought the yacht around to San Remo. He hoped they would cruise—all of them, he hoped. He wanted to take in the islands.

They were all ready with acceptances, save Torpichen, who might not have heard.

"If you'd care to take a run to-morrow, I'd be awfully glad to take you out. We can have luncheon aboard and get back early. Will you?"

Again they agreed.

"And you, Torpichen?"

"I? Oh, thanks! I don't know. I'm afraid I can't go to-morrow. No — I've something very important—very important. Thank you, Forbess." He got up abruptly. "You must excuse me, princess," he said hastily. "May I go now? It is very important."

"Andrew! You are ill?"

"No, I am not ill; but please—please excuse me."

He repeated his apologies, touched his hostess's hand, and went swiftly out of the room.

The princess raised her eyebrows, shrugged her massive shoulders, and said:

"If that isn't Andrew all over! You must forgive him. I'm so sorry! He is eccentric—quite eccentric at times. Of course you know he is not really my nephew—a connection by marriage. He is one of the Bulmers, and they are all—" She broke off. "The coffee is in the drawing-room. Shall we go?"

They did not linger long over the coffee. Torpichen's brusque departure had left a sense of embarrassment. It was not at all the sort of thing the Mildings liked, and they were the first to go. Then the *padre* slipped out.

Young Forbess stood by the princess's chair, looking down at her.

"You know, I should like to tell you about Betty," he began; "but I think—I hope you understand. I wonder if you will help me!"

"I'm not sure I do understand."

"I have never spoken to Betty about anything—the way I feel, you know. I wanted her to have a chance to get better acquainted with me—to learn to like me."

"Betty!" the princess exclaimed. "You don't mean you are in love with Betty?"

"Yes."

"But—"

"That is the reason I am here—for her. If I may count on your approval—"

He brought the words out diffidently. The princess stood up and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"You poor, poor boy!" she murmured, and her voice was full of motherly kindliness. "Do you not know—have you not heard—that Betty is engaged to marry Andrew Torpichen? The announcement is to be made as soon as they reach San Remo."

It was a blow, but he took it gravely, standing perhaps a trifle straighter, facing her steadily; but underneath the quiet surface was a tumult of pain and confusion.

"It is kind of you to tell me," he said, after a moment. "I did not know—I could not know."

She watched him with sympathetic eyes. When he bade her good night and turned away, she made no effort to detain him. Frivolous and careless she was, but she had seen something in his quiet face that awed her. She knew that she had been given a glimpse of the anguish a man may carry in his soul and still live.

Forbess went out into the night. He was glad of the darkness. He took refuge in it. He walked a few steps and then stood still. He could not think, for always that tumult of confused pain was racing through him, drowning his thoughts—sweeping them away.

A strong hand fell on his arm.

"Come with me, Forbess." The *padre's* voice reached him as through a cloud. "To-night I'll put you up in the chalet. It was your father's home in the old days, and you will find it good to be there. Come!"

They went together through the dark streets. The old priest, in his all-comprehending wisdom, did not speak, except once, when he said gently:

"You will be alone—and very quiet."

V

Forbess came out on the terrace in front of the little stone chalet, where he had found loneliness, if not peace. Somehow or other the night had passed. He had been hard hit by the news of Betty's engagement, but he kept himself in hand. His kind of love was not a tempest that could express itself only in noise and fury. It was something deep within him—something he could not show to any one, since Betty was lost to him. Not even to little Betty could he tell it now.

Perhaps the *padre* knew. Beyond doubt the *padre* knew. Indeed, what was hidden from those wise old eyes? Something lightly said must have told him the story. A word, a gesture, a look, had betrayed the secret of the young man's love.

The old priest had known, too, that it was a hopeless love. The princess must have confided in him the secret of Betty's betrothal to Torpichen. The rest he had foreseen. Therefore he had waited until Forbess came out into the night, had taken his arm in a fatherly way, and had led him up to this little stone dwelling of loneliness, where he might get himself in hand. A kindly thought of his father's old friend and tutor!

In the morning a man had brought Forbess's luggage from the hotel. An angular old woman—a woman of few words—had waited upon him, with pride in the service, setting out his breakfast. She had spoken of the *padre* with reverence, and had called him *monsieur le baron.* The old priest had once been a man of the world. He remembered—yes!

To the left of the terrace upon which Forbess stood was the house of the Jesuits. Its back was against the old tower and the gloomy bulk of buildings that rose, one upon the other, like a monstrous and ancient city. This was old San Remo. In its huddled confusion, narrow streets twisted aimlessly about, climbing flights of stone steps, sinking into vaulted passages, or diving beneath broken arches—a labyrinth of time-old masonry, over which sinuous, dingy vines clambered and drooped.

Upon this crumbling monument of a dead civilization — the medieval world of warfare and lust, which belonged to the sons of adventure—the great house turned its back. It opened every door and window on the spacious garden of the Jesuits, which descended in broad terraces to the stony bed of the *torrente* and to the gates that shut it off from the town.

The garden was beautiful. There was always a murmur in the vines, the olive trees, and the palms. There was sunlight on the white stairs, curving down from terrace to terrace among the orange trees and the lighter flame of the lemons.

Beyond the garden wall, the city, blond and red, crept down to the blue of the bay, which shimmered like scarabs of sapphire, of emerald, of gold. That white blur seaward was Forbess's yacht, lying motionless on the calm water.

He crossed to the edge of the terrace in front of the chalet. Looking down, he saw some one moving swiftly, furtively, with a kind of limping activity, among the trees. He tried to make out what kind of a man it was, flitting to and fro there in the garden, where he had fancied that only the priests walked, conning prayers. Once the fellow stood for an instant, posed full in the sunlight, just beneath him, and Forbess saw him distinctly.

A strange figure, lean, short, muscular, with a hollow chest and powerful arms, dressed in ill-fitting garments that wind and sun and rain had turned to a dingy green. He wore no hat, and his hair stood in tufts, coarse and thick, on his head; but it was his face that caught and held Forbess's attention, as the little man turned and stared up craftily, over his hunched shoulder, at the young Englishman.

The forehead was low and hairy. The cheek bones made harsh angles under the skin. The thin lips were drawn back, displaying the teeth; but the eyes—the creature's eyes—Forbess had never seen such eyes in the head of anything human. They were hidden in caverns under thick, hairy brows, and they were the eyes of something older than humanity, pale, fixed—eyes that had looked into secret places—upon hidden things.

Even as Forbess watched him, the little man was gone, slipping away among the tree trunks. At his heels, furtive as he, crept a little red dog.

"Who was that down there?" Forbess asked of the tall servant who had come from the chalet.

"I did not see any one," Lucrezia said stolidly.

"And the *padre*—have you seen him?"

"He is in the garden yonder, *signore.*"

The priest was coming toward them, his gray head bare, his long robe swinging to his stride. A strange old man! Forbess had often heard the history of his life of adventure. A nobleman of an ancient house, he had been a soldier in his youth, and then a diplomat in the service of his country. He had gamed, made love, and intrigued for power in half the courts of eastern Europe.

He who has once drunk of this heady wine rarely sets down the cup until it is empty; but the Baron Testevi, still young, had sickened of it. He knew the black hours; and neither love nor wine nor power could lighten them. What he wanted he found in the church and the black robe of the Jesuit. The stern service of his order took him into the Far East, and into many distant lands, on his apostolic mission. After the years he had come back to Europe—to San Remo, to the old monastery that the Jesuit fathers built in the early days of their order.

All this Forbess knew, and he could not easily understand how a man who had known the sense of power that comes from rank and fortune, who had drunk deep of every emotion, who had loved and killed, could find satisfaction in this life of little things. He had yet to realize that the somber cassock covered a greater sense of power, a more magnificent pride, than any the world could give.

The old *padre* was both kindly and wise. After installing the young man in the quiet chalet, he had left him to himself, knowing that wounded love and wounded self-esteem heal best alone. He had shown him the comforts of the little house—the books and the wine. Before saying good night, he had bethought him of the yachting cruise planned for the coming day.

" You'll not want to go on with that," he had suggested. " Best put it off. I'll send word down to every one. Leave it to me."

Forbess had acquiesced. It seemed of supreme indifference to him, now that Betty was taken out of his life. He did not care to see those people—none of them—not the princess—not Torpichen.

A night's rest had brought back self-control, if not peace, and with it a desire for human companionship. He hailed the *padre,* and joined him in the garden.

" How d'ye do?" said the old man. " Shall we sit here? From this bench you can see all our domain." He chuckled at the pompous word. " This is where I sit and plan the great work."

The " great work " was that of recovering, bit by bit, the property of which the Jesuits had been stripped in the last anti-clerical *furia.* They had got back the ancient monastery to the left of the garden, and had recovered many of the old houses on the hill that sloped down, on the other side, to San Stefano.

" Slowly," said the *padre,* " slowly it will all come back to us."

" And then?"

" Oh, then," the old man replied with tolerant cynicism, " they will kick us out again. We came here more than three hundred years ago. We built all those houses above your head, and old San Stefano below. Our schools covered half the hill yonder above the *torrente.* In those days San Remo had its own parliament, and it turned us out and confiscated everything. Of course we came back. We always do come back. That time it took us one hundred and fifty years; but the government—it was Genoa that ruled the town then—suppressed our order and pillaged us once more. Of course we returned again, and twice in the last century they have kicked us out."

The *padre* seemed to be fond of that ugly phrase. He repeated it with a kind of bitter relish.

" When we got back the last time," he went on, " the buildings were rotting to ruin, and the garden was devastated—democracy had pastured its mules there. I bought it from the city. You see—now it blooms again. The trees and vines give fruit. I have made the falling houses strong and new once more—roofs to shelter men. Some day, sooner or later, it will be given up to desolation once more. The houses will swarm with vermin—the rats of revolution will caper in them. The walls will crumble. The trees will die. There will be neither fruit nor flowers. Just such a ruin has followed every confiscation; and so it shall be."

" Until you come again," Forbess said.

" We always come again," the *padre* answered. He stood up, lean and erect. " Always we come again. And they? They die and are laid in the earth. It fills their mouths and their nostrils, and penetrates and absorbs them; and when we come again, this "—he stamped on the blue marl of the garden walk—" is all that is left of them."

His gesture was impressive. The old man in the dingy cassock was timeless as a prophecy; and Forbess began to understand that he was a priest precisely as a lion is a lion and an earthquake is an earthquake, because it is absolutely indispensable to be what destiny decrees, and to be nothing else. Even destiny, the young man thought, must have been hard put to it now and then to keep this fiery old swashbuckler bundled up in a black gown. He watched him striding up and down—still prophesying, it may be.

" *Padre,*" he called out suddenly, " who is that down there?"

The little limping fellow whom he had seen before was peering at him from the shelter of a rose bush with those strange cavernous eyes, fixed, disquieting.

" That," said the *padre,* " is Beppo. Beppo is a sort of gardener. Lucrezia brought him to me. He is her nephew, or cousin, or something—you can't tell much about these hill people. They are Ligurians, you know—pagans," he added, resuming his seat on the bench. " They are a queer race up there. They live in their ruined stone cities like wild things in caves—a queer race, some Aryan fragment marooned in the barren hills, living on, untouched by modern things. Why, it is only in my time that a road was driven through to them and fluttered some of them out into the open. I should like to take you up into that world. I often go."

"What takes you up there, *padre?"*

The old man chuckled. It was a way he had of preparing for a statement that might bear heavy on credulity.

"I do duty up there, quite often," he explained.

"Yes?"

"As exorcist."

"What's that, *padre?"*

"There are devils up in those hills, and the peasants are harried by them. Don't laugh too soon. One never knows what is going on up there. They are doing things their ancestors did. They pour magic drink to propitiate evil spirits. They light fires to old, forgotten white gods—even in these days, and within sight of the Madonna of Lampedusa. If they call the devil, why shouldn't he come? I've seen strange things in the Ligurian hills, and strange people."

"And that's where your gardener came from?"

"Beppo? He is one of them. It's for Lucrezia's sake I took him on. She seems to think he has a soul worth saving."

"From what I've seen of him," the young man remarked lightly, "he is not quite the gift I should think of offering to Omnipotence!"

"It is easy to jest about that poor wretch," the *padre* replied gravely; "but I think it might be better for us to leave the question of his soul to the mercy of God."

"I'm sorry, *padre* — I meant nothing. There's something about the fellow—"

"Yes, there is something about the fellow," the *padre* agreed. "Do you know what it is? It's the shadow of those rocky hills, where they still light fires to strange gods. Did you see his dog?"

"I saw a little dog."

"A sad little red dog? He never whistles for his dog, never calls it, yet it is always at his heels, listening. The dog is as queer as he is. When they think they are alone, mark you — I've heard them at it—they talk to each other in a language they both understand — a sort of cooing, half muted whine, rising and falling. I don't trust that dog."

"And Beppo?"

The *padre* had been speaking in a low tone, but suddenly he raised his voice.

"Beppo is a good lad," he remarked, brightly. "I have faith in humanity, and some in Beppo."

Footsteps sounded on the path above.

"Lucrezia?"

"Yes, it must have been Lucrezia. She was listening."

"But could she understand?"

"Dear son, when an old woman listens she always understands."

"But English?"

"What would the language matter? Lucrezia, too, comes from the hills. Anyway"—he repeated his words in a half whisper—"old women, when they listen, always understand. It is a terrible gift. I think it is given them in compensation for all they have had to suffer when they were young."

He was silent for a while.

"Lucrezia," he said at length, "will give you a dinner worth while if you dine here to-night. You will be alone. You don't mind?"

"It is what I came for—to be alone."

"Yes—to lean up against yourself. I understand. Lean against yourself and get steady. I shall be yonder in the house, if you want me; but you have yourself to lean on, eh?"

"Yes," the young man answered, "myself, and the day, and the night, and a pipe, and you, *padre,* if I need you."

"Aye," said the *padre;* "and don't forget the flask of Apricale wine I sent over. There are books, too—books, and always books; and overhead is the ancient mercy of God, who understands the hearts of all men. You'll be all right, Hugh!"

"I shall be all right."

They said good-by, and the *padre* went over to the house.

Forbess spent most of the day alone by the sea. It was nightfall when he returned to the chalet. A fire of pine cones and olive logs was blazing on the hearth. Half a dozen old brass lamps, with wicks burning in tiny cups filled with olive oil, gave light. There were rugs on the stone floor, and on the whitewashed wall a faded Madonna in a wooden frame.

This was the principal room. From it opened a kitchen, with stairs going down to a cellar. Above, there were only the square bedroom and two lesser rooms fitted as dressing room and bath.

Lucrezia had laid the little table near the fireplace and set out his simple meal—the soup and fowl and salad, the cheese and fruit, and the flask of Apricale. He thanked her. It was all he wanted.

"Here are the keys, *signore*," she said, "if you want to lock the door after me."

"There is only this door, isn't there—the one to the garden?"

"Yes—there is no other way out or in."

"I remember. The *padre* told me so last night."

When she had gone, he closed the heavy door behind her, and locked it. For a long while he sat by the fire, with his thoughts.

He was not the first man who had lost the woman that he wanted of all the world. He must pull himself out of the pit. There was really no use hiding like a wounded animal; he would get back to his own kind of life. There was always the yacht. If he couldn't forget her—but he knew perfectly well he couldn't forget her. Her image would steal after him through the water, peering up at him from the flying foam, calling to him, holding him.

Since he knew she had given her love to another man, he was glad, above all things, that he had not spoken to her of his own love. He would only have troubled her and thrown a shadow on her happiness.

After all, what did he want most—her happiness, or his own? He knew that in the end he would have to admit that what he wanted most was her happiness. It would come to that in the end—when his own pain died down a little.

How long he sat there he did not know. The oil lamps were flickering down. It was very quiet. There were no longer any sounds, of either hoofs or feet, in the lane that ran behind the chalet. Only an old log crackled on the hearth.

Upon the young man sitting there long-needed sleep began to fall, lightly, cloudily—less sleep than the shadow of sleep. He dared not move for fear he might frighten it away. He waited, hoping it would envelop him, shroud him in forgetfulness, that he might not think of her.

One of the lamps was still alive, pouring dull yellow light from its three tiny bowls. How good the silence was! He let himself sink into it.

Then, suddenly, the night, the silence, his world of dreams, seemed to be torn and riven by a wild outcry—a cry of savage horror, stifled, but fierce—that dragged him to his feet.

"In the room!" he exclaimed. "It was in the room!"

Save for himself the room was empty—save for himself and his shadow moving on the whitewashed walls.

Again the silence.

"It was here—in the room—beside me—under my feet!"

He picked up the lamp and went into the kitchen. Nothing!

He looked down the dark staircase to the cellar. There was a door, but he could not open it until he had drawn the heavy oak bar and turned the key in the lock.

He pulled the door toward him, and entered the cellar. It was a stone cave, with stone floor and stone walls, old as time, with no apparent outlet save a barred window high in the wall and a small door opening on the terrace. Both door and window were securely locked. In one corner of the cellar lay the pine cones for his fire, in another the logs of olive wood. Empty flasks, broken, dust-defiled, littered the floor. That was all.

"It is empty," he said, "as my naked hand!"

Returning the way he had come, he mounted the stairs to the kitchen and bolted the door behind him. Nothing had changed in that room, nor in the living room beyond, where he had been sitting by the fire. Both were empty and utterly silent.

He opened the front door which gave on the terrace. A little puff of wind extinguished his lamp. Gradually his eyes accustomed themselves to the night. He saw something moving in the darkness. It came from the corner of the chalet at his left, and, as he crossed the terrace, it was outlined for an instant against the sky. He thought he knew that figure of a man, with hunched shoulders and limping feet.

"Hey, Beppo!" he shouted.

The figure dipped below the sky line and was gone, as a shadow goes.

What was it, he asked himself, this cry in the night? Something more horrible than fear had screamed aloud—what terror in the night? And this dark little man slinking about the locked and silent house?

For a long time Forbess stood, listening, watching, before he went back to the dying fire.

(*To be continued in the November number of* MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE)

The Matchmaker

THE STRANGE RESULT OF RALPH HASTINGS'S PLAN TO MARRY OFF GALE FOSTER TO ANOTHER MAN

By William Slavens McNutt

GALE FOSTER sat alone on the end of the dock, and sneered.

"Sissy!" she muttered, fitting her back against the cool surface of a huge wet pile, and relaxing with the beautiful, comfortable abandon possible to a completely healthy fifteen-year-old girl in a boy's bathing suit. "Sissy! Booby! Can't even swim! Yah!"

She was watching a boy in a canoe some thirty yards from the end of the dock, and carefully pretending to be unaware of his presence. The boy's name was Ralph Hastings. He was about Gale's age, and lived next door to her.

Nature had been in either a careless or a comical mood while shaping him. He was all feet and hands and head. You could look at him from behind and know that he wore spectacles. All tall, scrawny-necked, bony-shouldered boys who look like that from behind wear spectacles. You could look at him from any angle and know that he was a precocious bookworm, that he was neither a seal in the water nor a lion on land, that no ordinary boy of his age could lack for laughter when he was about, and that no girl of Gale Foster's appearance, age, and character could possibly avoid actively despising and detesting him.

Gale, be it known, could hold her own with any neighborhood boy of her age at swimming, tennis, golf, or horseback riding. She was strong and tireless and physically skillful, and she heartily and openly despised those who were easily fatigued and physically inept.

And so she sat on the dock and sneered, as she watched Ralph manipulate his frail craft with the clumsy overcaution which is ever more dangerous than confident recklessness. She saw the spent wave from the wake of a distant passing steamer before he did, and saw that if he did not shift his course it would catch him broadside on and probably upset him. She saw this, and a grin of anticipatory delight replaced the sneer on her face.

She giggled when Ralph noticed the swell almost upon him, and struggled frantically to head his canoe into it. The combination of the swell and the boy's bungling attempt to keep the canoe on an even keel did the business, and over he went.

Quick as the upset was, the boy was scarcely under water when Gale Foster dived from the dock to rescue him. To reach him, she had to swim thirty yards and then dive twice. In spite of his frantic struggles, she managed to tow him to within a few yards of the float before help arrived.

Denny Shevlin, Gale's bachelor uncle, was first on the scene. He promptly plunged in and managed to drag the two young people to the float, where excited friends and relatives waited to pull them from the water.

Ralph was unconscious. Gale, while too weak to stand, still had sufficient vitality left to express emotion. Her elders, bending solicitously above her as she lay panting, gradually became aware that nothing ailed the child but exhaustion and anger. While they petted her and tried to soothe her, she writhed and sputtered like an angry cat.

Her vocal powers and the strength to stand unaided on her sturdy limbs returned to her at about the same moment that Ralph Hastings returned to consciousness. Gale arose indignantly, shook off those who attempted to assist her, and strode across the dock to where Ralph lay on his back, with his head in his weeping mother's lap, trying to collect his scattered wits and to determine what all the excitement was about.

"Oh, Gale!" Ralph's mother cried out. "You saved him! You saved my boy! How can I ever thank you? How can I ever—"

"Oh, shut up!" Gale said rudely. "Shut up! Shut up!"

She stood, her bare legs spread, her arms akimbo on her slender hips, looking, in her wet bathing suit, and with her severely bobbed yellow hair, like a sturdy, defiant boy.

"You booby!" she spat out at Ralph. "You big silly cry baby, you! Now see what you went and pretty nearly did! You pretty nearly got us both drowned—that's what you did! A great big boy like you that can't swim! Aren't you ashamed of yourself, making me jump in the water and pull you out and pretty nearly get drowned myself doing it? I ought to have let you stayed there and drown — that's what I ought to have done. You great big booby, you! I'm ashamed of you—that's what I am! I'm ashamed that I live on the same street where your house is. I'm ashamed that I live in the same town where you do!"

"Why, Gale!" Ralph's mother exclaimed protestingly.

"Aw, shucks!" said Gale.

"Now, Gale!" said Mrs. Foster, in a tone of reproof.

"Oh, darn!" said Gale.

"Now listen, Gale," said her uncle. "You mustn't—"

"Oh, damn!" said Gale explosively, and dived back into the Sound.

"Gale! Come back here!" her uncle called apprehensively, as she came to the surface.

She did not answer him. She did not answer any of the rest who called excitedly to her. Her wind recovered, she swam smoothly out to the diving float, pulled herself upon it, and sat there sulking, dabbling her feet and legs in the water, and paying no apparent heed to the adult commotion ashore.

Ralph Hastings stood up on trembling legs and looked miserably across the water at the scornful heroine who had saved his life.

"Dog-gone it!" he muttered. "What did she have to go and do it for? Now I got to thank her and everything! Dog-gone it! I'd just about as soon have been drowned!"

II

With shock and exhaustion as excuses, Ralph Hastings stayed in bed for three days, and thus staved off the inevitable humiliating moment when he must meet and thank Gale Foster, and must listen to the tirade of abuse which he felt certain would be his portion.

While he lay thus, enjoying his reprieve as best he might, a horrible thought occurred to him. In a panic, he called his mother and questioned her.

"Ma, tell me something," he demanded anxiously. "If—if a girl, now, was to save a fellow's life some way or another, would it be just the same as if a fellow saved a girl's life, or would it be different? It would be different, wouldn't it? I mean it wouldn't be just the same, would it? I mean it would be some different, wouldn't it, anyhow? Wouldn't it, ma?"

"What in the world are you getting at, Ralph?" his mother asked.

"Well, now, I've read in stories where fellows saved girls' lives," Ralph explained; "and always, the way I read 'em, the girl kind of had to marry the fellow because he did it. It wouldn't be like that if it was the other way around, would it?"

Mrs. Hastings laughed.

"Ralph, are you worried for fear that you'll have to marry Gale Foster when she grows up?"

Ralph blushed.

"Well, maybe I was thinking about that, in a way," he admitted. "Of course, she wouldn't want to marry me, anyhow. She hates me. She always did hate me; but what I mean is, do I have to ask her to marry me, or anything like that?"

"Don't be silly!" his mother said. "Of course not!"

Ralph gave a sigh of relief.

"I just wanted to know," he said. "I got to thinking about it. I didn't know whether I had to or not. Gosh, I'd hate to have to do that! I'd do 'most anything for Gale, in a way. I always kind of liked her. I'd like her quite a lot, I guess, if she wouldn't pester me so much; but I tell you, mother, I wouldn't want to ask her to marry me!"

"You're too young to fret yourself about such things," Mrs. Hastings reproved him.

Ralph shook his head solemnly.

"No, I'm not, ma," he contradicted her. "I know I'm too young to get married, but I'm old enough to bother my head about it. You'd be surprised, I guess, to know how much I bother about it. You see, I don't want to get married, ever, because I don't like girls much, and girls don't like me at all; but I worry a lot for fear some time something will happen, and I will. I hope I don't, ma! Some fellows don't, do they? Gale's uncle, Mr. Shevlin, never did, did he? If he never did, maybe I can get along without doing it."

"Silly!" said Mrs. Hastings.

"Anyhow, I'm glad I don't have to ask Gale to marry me when she grows up," Ralph went on, somewhat relieved; "but I've got to go thank her for saving my life, pretty soon," he added lugubriously. "She'll give me fits because I don't know how to swim."

He met Gale the next afternoon, while she was severely busy in her own back yard, baking tiny pies on a tiny stove in a miniature tent. She lived up to the limit of his expectations.

"You needn't thank me for saving your old life," she said, puttering busily with her work all the while. "If I'd stopped to think, I guess I wouldn't have done it. You're no good to anybody. You just lay around all the time, and don't do anything. All you do is just be a sissy. I know lots of girls in this town who ain't as much like girls as you are. The idea of a big boy like you that can't swim!"

"I'll learn to swim, if you want me to, Gale," Ralph promised humbly.

"I don't care if you learn to swim or not," Gale said. "You can lay around and read all the time, and get drowned some time, for all I care!"

"Anyhow, I'm awfully obliged to you for saving my life," Ralph said. "I'd like to do something for you, if I could."

Gale laughed and shook her head.

"You can't do anything for me," she said decisively.

Ralph hesitated and reddened.

"You know, if you—if you wanted me to, I'd—I'd wait and marry you when you grow up," he said.

Gale Foster straightened and stared at him. The boy recoiled from her expression even before she spoke.

"Marry me!" she stormed at him. "Marry me, you cry baby! You big sissy! You big booby, you! Marry me! I'm sorry I didn't let you stay in the water and drown. You go on home, and don't you come back here any more, either. Go on, now! You get out of my yard and stay out! You—you make me mad all the time. Every time I see you, you make me so mad I could pick up something and hit you. Get out of my yard and stay out, and don't talk to me!"

Ralph retreated, shambling, dejected, and sat for a time hunched up on the back porch of his house, watching Gale out of the corner of his eye, while she busied herself with her baking. There was an ache in his heart, which, curiously enough, was not caused by any wound to his own vanity. He was inexplicably sorry for Gale Foster.

"I wish I could do something for her!" he said to himself at length, with a sigh. "I would if I could. I bet I could, too, if she'd let me!"

He sighed again, sought out a book, and sank to awkward rest in the hammock.

"Sissy!" Gale Foster said viciously under her breath, as she watched him furtively. "Booby! Great big cry baby! I'm ashamed I know him!"

III

Having once seen the fifteen-year-old Ralph Hastings lying in his hammock and reading a book, you would have had no difficulty in recognizing the man he had become in the thirty-year-old Ralph Hastings who sat sprawled in a big wicker chair on the broad veranda of the Green Stream Country Club. He was longer and lanker than he had been as a boy, and, if anything, more interestingly ugly. Heavy horn-rimmed glasses bestrode his bony nose, and a book lay open on his lap.

As he sat thus, relaxed, dreamily staring out over the sunlit course, Gale Foster came briskly from the hall with a bag of clubs slung over her shoulder. She was a beautiful woman, and yet not an attractive one. Her loveliness repelled rather than allured. It bade the beholder stand and admire, but did not invite.

She stopped for a moment and looked at Ralph Hastings sprawling in his chair. There was a cold hostility in her blue eyes.

"Not playing this afternoon, I suppose?" she asked, with an edge of contempt in her tone.

Ralph blinked.

"No," he admitted guiltily. "I've got

this book to do by Thursday, and I haven't read it yet. I thought I'd sit here and—"

"You would!" she said with emphasis, and strode away to the first tee.

Denny Shevlin, white-haired now, and with a bit of a paunch, arrived in the doorway in time to overhear the conversation. Shrugging, he dropped into a chair beside Ralph.

"Still riding you, eh?" he said.

Ralph nodded.

"She always did," he said. He smiled ruefully. "You should have heard what she said to me when I went into the Red Cross, in 1917. Ouch! To hear her talk, you'd think I hadn't tried to enlist. She gave me such a merciless scorching that I went back and tried again in half a dozen different places. Not a chance, of course! My eyes, you know—at least, they were the worst. Lord knows there were plenty of other things wrong—heart and feet and weight and this and that. After I'd failed all over again, I came back and told her how I'd tried. She gave me a worse lambasting than before. She took up my life from the beginning, and explained in painful detail that I'd been a slacker from boyhood, that my inability to get into the army was just due to the lazy, useless life I'd led. She's right, of course, but I never could get interested in games, somehow. I don't know why. Knocking some kind of a ball from here to there and back always seemed silly to me."

"What a soldier Gale would have made, if only she'd been a boy!" Denny Shevlin exclaimed.

"Wouldn't she just?" said Ralph. "As it was, she made a great record for herself in the Red Cross. She did great work down in the Balkans, and over in Armenia after the armistice. She did a darned sight better than I could have done, even if I'd had the chance. I got stuck right there in Paris for the duration. Lucky for me, I suppose. I'd probably have got the croup, and died, if they'd sent me out any place where I'd have had to undergo hardships of any sort."

Denny Shevlin looked at the young man curiously.

"What are you doing with yourself now?" he asked.

Ralph shrugged.

"Oh, book reviewing, mostly — same thing that I did before the war. I wasn't much good as a reporter, you know."

"Doing any writing of your own?" Shevlin asked.

Ralph nodded.

"Working on a novel. Probably no good. I had one published last year, but it didn't get anywhere. Some of the critics liked it, but no sale to speak of."

"Lucky for you you're independent," Shevlin said. "If you didn't have an income—"

Ralph laughed.

"I'd be a terrible thing, wouldn't I? I don't suppose I could make more than enough to just barely keep alive. Thank God, I don't have to!"

"I guess Gale is making quite a pot of money these days, one way and another," Shevlin said.

"Sure is," said Ralph enthusiastically. "She's a wonder! That restaurant and tea room of hers, down in the village, is making her all kinds of a profit, and she's got it organized now so that she doesn't have to give much of her own time to it. Then those grotesque little figures she does are selling like hot cakes in the gift shops all over the country. She's dragging down big royalties from them. Lord knows what else she's into. I think that book of hers, 'The Red Cross in the Near East,' made some money. Darned well written, too—full of color and punch. She's a wonder!"

"She is," Shevlin agreed; "and yet I think she's one of the unhappiest women I know."

Ralph Hastings sat up with a start and looked at Mr. Shevlin.

"You think that really?" he inquired earnestly.

"I do," replied Shevlin firmly.

Ralph drew a long breath and held out his hand.

"Shake!" he said. "You've got sense. I didn't think anybody but me knew that. I don't believe Gale knows it herself. You could get a hearty laugh, any time, telling Gale's friends she isn't happy; but she isn't. I know it, and now you say you know it. What's the matter with her?"

"Man," said Shevlin shortly.

"Man!" Ralph repeated, staring. "Why—why, good Lord! I didn't know Gale ever had a love affair."

"She never did," said Shevlin.

"But you said—"

"I was too brief for clarity. What I mean is that she needs a man to love."

"But good Lord, man!" Ralph said.

"She doesn't want anything to do with men, except to beat them at golf or tennis or swimming. There are scores of fellows who would give her a rush if she didn't freeze them before they got started. Naturally, you never tried to make love to Gale. Neither did I, as far as that goes; but I know some who have. Believe me, none of them tried it twice."

"The right man wouldn't have to try at all," said Shevlin. "She'd take one look at him, and grab and hang on. The trouble with Gale is that she's a superwoman. None of the ordinary run of runts make any appeal to her. She's a superwoman, and she'll stay single and loveless and increasingly unhappy until she meets a superman who is fit to mate with her. Then, my boy, you'll see a match!"

"I bet you're right," Ralph said solemnly. "Yes, sir, I'll bet you're right. I never thought of it that way before. That's what's the matter with her, sure!" He sat up suddenly and slapped his knee. "By George!" he exclaimed. "I believe I've got it!"

Shevlin looked at him.

"The pip?" he inquired.

"Probably," Ralph admitted; "but that's incidental. See here, Mr. Shevlin, you think a lot of Gale, don't you? You'd do a lot for her?"

"I take pride in my reputation for probity," said Shevlin, "but I used to lie for her like a Turk when she was a little girl. I'd do as much for her now, and probably more. Why?"

"I feel the same way about her," Ralph said earnestly. "I always liked Gale. I don't know why. Lord knows she never furnished me with a legitimate reason; but I always have. You know she saved my life once."

Shevlin chuckled.

"I remember," he said. "I was there. She pulled you out of the water, and then called you everything that a well bred girl of her years could be expected to know. I think she'd probably have tossed you back in, if some of us hadn't been there to stop her."

Ralph nodded.

"She's always been that way with me. Stopped just now and withered me with a look because I was going to read a book this afternoon, instead of playing a round. I don't mind, somehow. I'm used to her. I would like to help her, Mr. Shevlin. I'd like to do something for Gale, and I believe I can!"

"Shoot!" said Denny Shevlin.

"Did you ever hear of Kirk Morgan?"

Old Mr. Shevlin thought for a moment, and shook his head hesitantly.

"Name sounds familiar, but I don't place it."

"He's a superman, if there ever was one," Ralph said enthusiastically. "He's got more money than any law ought to allow. He's so good-looking that all men under ninety-seven hate him on sight. He's an athlete, a sportsman, and a scholar."

"I get you," said Mr. Shevlin. "He headed some kind of an expedition into the arctic some years ago, didn't he?"

"Right!" said Ralph. "Hunting and taking pictures. Afterward he did the same thing in Africa and India. Then in 1914, when the war broke out, he—"

"I know," said Shevlin. "Enlisted with the French, didn't he?"

"Air service—that's him. In 1916 he was shot down behind the German lines, and taken prisoner."

"Sure! He escaped, too, didn't he?"

"That's him," said Ralph. "Got back to the United States and went into our air service as soon as we got into it. He was one of our aces, and after the armistice, when he was demobilized, he fought with the Poles for a while. A regular fighting fool!"

"Yes," said Shevlin. "What of it?"

"I know him well," Ralph said.

"That may mean something to you," Shevlin said. "It may warm the cockles of your heart and stir you to your immortal depths, but somehow it leaves me cold. My question still stands."

"I roomed with him for a year at college," Ralph went on, "and I saw a good deal of him in Paris during the war. We're really very good friends. Don't you see? I could get him!"

"Ramble on," said Shevlin. "There's no sense in your conversation, but it's cool and comfortable on the veranda, and I can doze while you talk. You won't mind, will you? I'll understand you just as well asleep as awake."

"Don't you see?" cried Ralph, beginning to wax indignant. "I could get him for Gale!"

Old Mr. Shevlin sat up with a start.

"Good God!" he said explosively.

" What's the matter?" inquired Ralph, in some surprise.

" Probably nothing," said Mr. Shevlin. " The thing sounded a bit raw, the way you put it. Get him for Gale, indeed! I gather that you're speaking of the man as my niece's prospective husband. It sounded as if you were talking of getting a wrist watch for her, or a new riding horse, or something of that sort."

" I think it's a peach of an idea," said Ralph. " I'll swear I do. They're a lot alike in many ways. Gale's a superwoman, the ordinary sort of fellows don't attract her, and so she's lonesome and unhappy. Same way with Kirk. No ladies' man at all. Don't think he ever had a real affair. Bring the two together, and what happens? Why, it's inevitable. They were made for each other. It 'll be an absolutely perfect match!"

Shevlin rose.

" Young man," he said solemnly, " some people squint down the muzzles of guns to see if they're loaded. There are others who play the rôle of matchmaker. I don't want to dampen your enthusiasm, but I'll make you a little bet that the angel in the celestial department that keeps the list of mortal fools doesn't write the names of the firearm idiots in the very highest class. That's reserved for the saps who go about with malice aforethought to cause the meeting of a certain man and a certain woman side by side at an altar, with a sky pilot at the apex of the triangle. Don't let these remarks discourage you, my son. They are no doubt the senile driveling of a doddering old man, far gone in his dotage; but, such as they are, I offer them to you."

" Just the same," said Ralph stubbornly, as old Mr. Shevlin moved away, " I think I'll send for Kirk, and have him come and visit me here for a while."

" By all means," said Shevlin, looking back over his shoulder as he paused in the doorway. " The great successes in this mad old world have always been made by brave fools who were deaf to words of wisdom, and who rushed in where cautious angels of the Safety First Brigade feared to tread. Hop to it, son, and God's blessing be upon you. You'll probably need it!"

IV

Ten days later, Kirk Morgan arrived. He immediately proceeded to prove that Ralph Hastings was a shrewd judge of those qualities of character that spring from the heart.

On the second day after his arrival, he was seated on the veranda of the Green Stream Country Club, with Ralph, when Gale Foster passed across the lawn on her way to the first tee. Kirk sat erect, as if some one had prodded him between the shoulders with a sharp pin.

" What's the matter?" Ralph asked.

" Who's that?" Kirk asked tensely, indicating Gale.

Ralph's heart beat fast.

" Why?" he asked.

" What a woman!" Kirk exclaimed. " Good Lord, what a woman! Who is she?"

" Oh, she's one of the gang around here," Ralph said, carefully casual. " Gale Foster. Lives right next door to us. She and I were kids together."

" Married?"

" No."

Kirk rose.

" I want to meet her," he said shortly.

" Sure!" said Ralph. " We're going to be around all afternoon. I'll keep an eye out for her, and I'll introduce you when she comes in."

Kirk shook impatiently.

" No," he said. " Now!"

" But she's starting out to play," Ralph objected. " She's going around with young Hotchkiss. She's meeting him there at the tee now. I can't very well march you down there and stop their game and—"

" Damn all that!" said Kirk Morgan emphatically. " I've waited thirty-four years to meet that woman, and I'm not going to wait any longer. Come on—shake a leg! Take me down there and introduce me."

Ralph rose from his chair with a pretense of reluctance.

" All right, Kirk," he said. " If you want to eat pie with your knife in public, I'll set the table for you."

Gale had already driven off when Ralph and Kirk reached the first tee. Young Hotchkiss had teed up his ball, and was dusting off his hands preparatory to gripping his club for the drive. He turned and frowned as Ralph intruded himself.

" Gale, I want you to meet Kirk Morgan," Ralph said abruptly.

Gale looked at the tall, lithe, black-haired, sunburned explorer, and a warm glow showed in her light blue eyes.

" You're the Kirk Morgan who wrote

'Big Game Shooting in Central Africa,' aren't you?" she said, with a note of reverence in her voice. She held out her hand impulsively. "I read that book through four times. That was a book!"

"I'm not a writing man," replied Kirk, holding her hand in his. "The words of a book come out of me like stubborn teeth from a sore jaw; but I'd have been willing to write that four times over to hear you say you liked it."

Gale flushed.

"That's a nice bit of flattery," she said, "but just a little bit too rich to be true."

"I mean it," Kirk asserted earnestly. "You're the sort of person I wrote that book for. When I finished, I was sure the effort was wasted, because, you see, I didn't think there was any such person."

Gale's laugh was light, but the flush on her face was deep, and a pleasant confusion of spirit was in her eyes.

"Words for conversation are not as difficult for you as words for a book, I take it," she said.

"With the perfect inspiration, words come easy for any purpose," he replied.

There was a slight pause. The two stood looking intently at each other. Gale apparently became aware, for the first time, that he was still holding her hand. The color in her face grew yet more vivid as she withdrew it.

"I have always wanted to hear more of the story of that lion that rushed you," she said, recovering herself. "You gave just enough detail in your book to make me curious to hear the rest. Will you tell me about it—all about it?"

"When?" said Morgan, with a challenge in his voice.

"Now," replied Gale, taking up the gauge without hesitation.

She laid her hand on his arm, and they moved away together toward the clubhouse, without explanations or apologies, talking earnestly in low tones.

Young Hotchkiss threw down his driver and stared after them.

"I'll be damned!" he exclaimed. "Of all the nerve! Of all the double-dyed, bred in the wool, one-thousand-and-one-per-cent nerve!"

"I knew it!" Ralph said ecstatically, looking after the engrossed pair.

Hotchkiss turned and scowled at him.

"You brought that animated collar advertisement down here," he said. "You're responsible. Just for that, you go dig up your clubs, come on down here, and play a round with me for five dollars a hole. You know what that will cost you, don't you?"

"Five times eighteen is ninety," said Ralph. "It's cheap at the price. Just a minute till I get my clubs. I'll be right back!"

V

"I GUESS you win," said old Mr. Shevlin grudgingly, as he sat on the clubhouse veranda with Ralph Hastings and watched the mounted figures of Kirk Morgan and Gale Foster disappear at a hard gallop over a distant hill. "It's not often any one can pick a man and a woman out of the mess of the world, and predict that they'll match like two pieces of wood in a well made piece of furniture, and have his prophecy come true; but you certainly did it, son. Looks that way, anyhow. I guess you win!"

"I guess I do," said Ralph moodily and without enthusiasm. "Why don't they announce their engagement and be done with it?"

"Good Lord, son!" replied Shevlin. "They haven't been acquainted long enough yet to remember each other's names without stopping to think."

"It's been a month," Ralph said irritably, "and they've been together every day in all that time. They ride together, and golf together, and play tennis together, and go swimming together. Holy mackerel, they make me sick!"

"Why, son!" Shevlin exclaimed. "What ails you? Can't you see that your plan is working perfectly?"

"I didn't plan to make a pair of hazy-minded, moon-eyed idiots out of my two good friends," Ralph said. "I suppose they'll get over it after they get married. Hope so, anyway. Hate to think they'd go through the rest of their lives struck silly, like a pair of mushy high school kids having a bad case of puppy love fever."

Shevlin eyed the boy curiously.

"Son," he said gently, "you remember what I told you when you suggested inviting this fellow Kirk Morgan here to meet Gale?"

"Not exactly," Ralph grumbled.

"Neither do I, exactly," said Shevlin; "but the general idea of my remarks was that you were in process of loading your mind down with considerably more trouble than it would be able to carry. It seems to me as if it was beginning to sit overly heavy right now."

"What do you mean?" Ralph blustered. "Why should I care? What is it to me, hey? Tell me that!"

"I don't know if I can," said Shevlin; "but I'll make a guess if you insist on it. Shall I?"

Ralph fidgeted in his chair, blushed, and rose abruptly.

"Oh, hell!" he said viciously, and walked away.

"Jealous!" said Shevlin to himself. "Why, the poor sucker! In love with Gale himself, and he didn't know it! Had to import a rival to beat him out before he discovered it! Hi hum!" he sighed, and called to a passing waiter to bring him a pot of tea.

"George," he said to the waiter, as the latter arranged the things on the table, "you wouldn't throw dynamite into a kitchen stove, would you?"

"No, sah," said the waiter, grinning. "No, sah! No, indeedy!"

"Don't bet on that," Shevlin warned him solemnly. "Wiser men than you do worse."

VI

On the following morning Ralph Hastings sat on a stringpiece of the float at the end of the little community dock, gloomily watching the play of gleaming shoulders as Kirk Morgan and Gale Foster sprinted through the water for the last two hundred yards of a two-mile swim.

Ralph was not in his bathing suit. He seldom was. To him water was a sanitary rather than a sporting proposition, and he took his in the bathtub. Old Mr. Shevlin sat near by, dressed for swimming, dabbling his fat pink toes in the water.

"A perfect pair!" he murmured, watching the two swimmers.

"Yes," said Ralph, without enthusiasm. "I bet I could have learned to swim if I'd tried!" he added combatively.

"Probably," said Mr. Shevlin.

"I'll bet I could even now," Ralph went on solemnly. "It can't be so much of a trick. Look at all the pinheads that can do it!"

"Millions of pinheads can read," Mr. Shevlin said; "but nevertheless it must be awkward not to be able to, eh?"

Kirk Morgan and Gale raced furiously for the last few yards, coming on in a wild whirl of spray. They climbed, laughing and panting, upon the float.

"What a pleasure to swim with one who can swim!" said Kirk.

"The same to you, sir," Gale returned, dimpling.

"Any good dog could outswim both of you," observed Ralph sullenly.

"Hello!" said Kirk. "Indigestion this bright morning?"

"Sour grapes," said Gale, frowning at Ralph.

Kirk laughed.

"There ought to be a law compelling people to learn how to take care of themselves in the water," he said.

"Take more than a law to do him any good," said Gale.

Kirk rose, grinning mischievously.

"You don't suppose he's been kidding us all these years, do you? Maybe he can swim and won't admit it. Let's chuck him in and find out!"

He stooped suddenly, and picked Ralph up easily in his big arms.

"In you go, old top!" he cried gayly. "We'll find out about you. Sink, swim, or be fished out!"

A spasm of fury suddenly twisted Ralph Hastings's face into a grotesque mask of fury. He fairly screamed an oath, and struck the mighty Kirk Morgan full in the right eye with his clenched fist.

Kirk gave an exclamation of amazement, dropped him to the float, and stepped back; but he was not thus easily free of the young man who had suddenly gone mad in his arms. Ralph Hastings dropped and hit the float fighting. He charged at Kirk, mouthing unintelligibly, and striking out wildly with revolving fists.

Kirk grabbed him and held him tight.

"Here, you!" he said angrily. "What do you think you're doing? Come on now—cut this out!"

An escaped fist jabbing him on the chin was his answer.

Kirk gave a growl of rage and used his strength. He bent Ralph down, and caught him firmly by his belt and the collar of his jacket.

"All right, you crazy young spitfire!" he said. "You're hot, are you? Well, we'll see if this will cool you off!"

Thus saying, he heaved his erstwhile friend off the float.

Gale Foster leaped to her feet, her face white.

"Kirk!" she cried out. "He can't swim a stroke!"

"I know it," Kirk growled. "I'll get him."

He dived and came up just as Ralph Hastings rose to the surface, sputtering and struggling frantically.

"Easy, now!" said Kirk, grabbing him. "Just keep still, and I'll get you ashore all right. Don't get scared, and don't struggle."

There was nothing in Ralph's immediate subsequent action to indicate that he was scared, and it must be said that he struggled—struggled with an insane fury to do as much damage as possible to Kirk's face. He grabbed Morgan by the hair with one hand and hammered his features furiously with the other, spitting out epithets and salt water, until they both sank beneath the surface.

Ralph was far spent when they came up again, and about one-third drowned, but he was still doing his instinctive bit at the job of working over Morgan's face.

"You fool!" Morgan raged at him. "All right! If you will have it, here it is for you!"

He lunged out with his big right fist and clipped Ralph smartly on the jaw. As he did so, a perfect hail of small, sharp fists and elbows beat upon his face. They were the fists and elbows of Gale Foster. After doing her unexpected bit in completion of the work Ralph had begun on Morgan's features, she dived for the sinking man.

As she came to the surface with him and started for the float, swimming on her back and towing him, his head resting on her breast, Kirk Morgan swam to help her. She warned him away with a vocal ferocity that stung like blows from a whip.

"Gale!" Kirk exclaimed, swimming after her. "I had to hit him! I had to knock him out! He'd have had us both drowned!"

"You beast!" Gale raged at him, as she reached the float, clambered out, and drew Ralph up after her without apparent effort. "You coward! You bully! Don't speak to me! Don't ever speak to me! Don't you dare!"

She fell to working feverishly over Ralph.

"Oh, my dear!" she crooned to him. "My poor dear! Ralph! Oh, honey boy, are you badly hurt?"

Ralph Hastings coughed and choked, spat out some sea water, swallowed some more, and sat up.

"You get away from me!" he cried at Gale, in as loud a voice as he could muster. "You've been bothering me all my life, and I'm sick of it! You go away from me and let me alone! You know I love you, damn you!"

"Ralph!" Gale exclaimed.

"Don't Ralph me!" he raged. "You heard what I said. 'Damn you!' I said, and I meant it, too! Just because I love you, you needn't think you can go on bothering me all the time. I'm through. You get away from me and stay away!"

"Ralph!" Gale said desperately, grabbing his wet, bedraggled head to her breast. "Don't talk to me that way—don't!"

"I will!" Ralph said in a smothered voice, struggling ineffectually to release himself from her ardent embrace. "You always hated me. Why don't you leave me alone?"

"I don't hate you," said Gale, beginning to cry, and holding him all the tighter. "I never hated you. I love you, Ralph, and you know it! Why, I've loved you all my life!"

"You *what?*" cried Ralph, twisting so that one corner of his mouth was free for utterance.

"I love you!" said Gale fiercely.

There was a pause. Kirk Morgan stood staring, open-mouthed, a sickly white color showing under the deep tan of his skin.

"Then what are you always bothering me and bawling me out for?" Ralph asked, speaking perforce into her wet bathing suit, after a brief but ineffectual attempt to wrench loose from her embrace.

Gale wept the harder and held Ralph the tighter.

"I wouldn't have cared, if I hadn't loved you," she said. "It was only because I loved you. You made me so mad!"

Kirk Morgan took a step forward.

"Gale!" he said entreatingly. "Gal

Gale looked up.

"Go away," she said crossly. "H you got any sense?"

Kirk bowed, turned, and went away there, walking rather grandly. Gale giggled a little. Ralph was writhing in her embrace.

"Say, let me loose, will you?" he said querulously. "Darn it, let me loose! I want to hug you!"

For this purpose she released him. The hugging having been accomplished, they walked up the dock together hand in hand, oblivious of Denny Shevlin, who was still sitting on the float.

He watched them for a little time as they walked together, looking at each other, their faces foolish with happiness. Then he turned again to the business of dabbling his fat pink toes in the cool green water.

He sighed heavily.

"I told him!" he said to himself. "I warned the boy! I told him he'd get himself into a pot of trouble if he monkeyed around with that matchmaking business! I told him!"

I HAVE KNOWN THE RUSH OF WINDS

I HAVE known the rush of winds,
  The roll of a driven boat,
And stood on wet and glistening decks,
  With the salt spray on my throat;
I have heard the waves crash,
  And all that roars and cries—
The gray seas in tumult,
  And the gray, sullen skies.

I have known the east wind
  And cursed the *wanderlust*—
The east wind that tears the sea
  And brings the heart distrust;
And I have watched the spindrift
  In pillars rise and fall
And break across the forward deck—
  And I have loved it all!

The spindrift, like a curtain
  Of white beads in the air,
That sways above a wave's crest,
  Ephemeral and fair,
And, shattered in its flying,
  Has spilled its beads again,
Like broken lace upon the seas
  Where ships sail with men.

Until you know the salt spray
  When softer than a kiss,
And know its sting upon your face
  When waves break and hiss,
You cannot know the sea's moods
  And all of hate and love,
Or cherish most a level sea
  And the still stars above;

To feel the spell of smooth nights
  Of moon and mystery,
The whisper underneath the prow
  That cuts the marbled sea;
And, lying on the forward deck,
  When all but murmurs cease—
I have known the rush of winds,
  But now I love the peace!

Charles Divine

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"I be
tried!
"Pr
"I'

The Promised Land

COLONEL BOLIVAR REDMOND STRUGGLES WITH THE PROBLEM OF KEEPING HIS COLORED PEOPLE AT HOME IN THE SOUTH

By Garrard Harris

COLONEL BOLIVAR REDMOND sat on the wide front porch, his feet propped against one of the big columns, his chair tilted back, his hat brim pulled down over his eyes. His right hand mechanically toyed with the white imperial on his chin; his left rested idly on the arm of the rocking-chair, and held a burned-out cigar.

From the gentle knoll upon which Ellerslie, plantation home of the Redmonds, was embowered in a grove of great oaks, the estate reached in every direction—a baronial domain of rich acres.

To the left was the plantation cotton gin, the blacksmith shop, and the commissary store, where the two county roads crossed. In the store was the post office of Ellerslie. Along the roads were many tenant houses, in various stages of disrepair, and most of them vacant. Two-thirds of the cultivable land of Ellerslie was lying idle, covered with a dense crop of cockle burrs and ragweeds.

In the wide hall behind the colonel some one was sweeping, and a musical voice kept singing over and over again:

"I am bound for the Promise' La-a-a-and,
  I am bound for the Promise' Land!
Oh, who will come and go with me-e-e-e?
  I am bound for the Promise' Land!"

"Nancy, come here!"

Colonel Redmond half turned in his chair. A neat yellow girl, broom in hand, approached and stood inquiringly.

"Want to make a quarter—real easy?"

"Yes, sir, colonel."

"Here it is. I'm paying you not to sing that infernal song again. All you colored folks are singing it, and it's got on my nerves. Have you-all adopted it as the African national anthem?"

"No, sir," she replied, smiling. "I reckon one hears another sing it, and that puts 'em in mind. It's an old camp meeting tune."

She went back to her work.

Mrs. Redmond, a slight, fragile woman with gray hair and traces of former striking beauty, joined her husband. A glance revealed to her sympathetic eyes that he was nervous and worried.

"I heard your trade with Nancy," she began smilingly. "I think that is rather a sweet old air."

"But every darky on the place is singing it. To them, the Promised Land means up North. That's what they're thinking about when they sing it."

"They certainly are leaving for up there!" said Mrs. Redmond, and sighed.

"Thirty thousand have gone from Georgia, twenty thousand or more from Alabama, about fifteen thousand from Mississippi, and ten thousand from Louisiana—so I saw in the paper yesterday," the colonel said. "And still going. That family I had down in the bend is gone—vanished. I thought they were well satisfied, and I didn't watch them closely. They had fair crop prospects, too."

"Owe you anything, Bolivar?"

"About two hundred and forty dollars."

"Well, it might be worse," she said, and smiled, to comfort him.

"I don't know. That's the twenty-third family to decamp from Ellerslie. The total of what they owe, and what I'll never see a cent of, is five thousand six hundred dollars—about."

Mrs. Redmond was aghast.

"Why, Bolivar! I had no idea it was so much!"

"The worst of it is, they leave me short of day labor hands, to make my crop with, aside from their share crops. And this boll weevil is awful! Three years ago we made twenty-two hundred bales; last fall we got one hundred and ten. It has pushed me to raise tax money."

The two sat, lost in thought. There was a strange silence upon Ellerslie. There was no sound of singing from the fields; no cheerful clink-clank of sharpening plow points or mending hoes from the smithy. The blacksmith had fled, too. Faintly, from the dismal cypress trees bordering the bayou in the distance, came the mournful sobbing of a dove.

"By Heaven, I feel just like that dove sounds!" blurted the old planter. "If this keeps up, I don't know where we'll end. The poorhouse, I reckon!"

"Miss Loulie, can I get off after dinner?" asked a pleasant voice.

Nancy was in the front hall, eagerly awaiting an answer.

"Why, I wanted you to mop this gallery and wash the front windows; but if there's any good reason—"

"Yes'm, my grandma what's over on the Watkins place is sick. I want to go see her."

"Oh, very well, then!" agreed the kindly mistress. "Is there anything I can do—any little delicacy I can send that would tempt her appetite?"

"No'm, I don't know if she can eat a-tall. She's mighty low."

"Well, if I can help in any way, let me know."

"Yes'm. Thanky, ma'am."

Nancy disappeared.

"That girl's lying. I can tell it every time when a darky is lying to me," growled the colonel.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that, Bolivar!"

"All right! All right! Have your way; but she's up to something, sure's a gun's iron!"

"Why don't you ride over and see Mr. Richardson and Bob Watkins and Major Pendleton? Perhaps you-all could figure out some way to make it more attractive, so the negroes won't leave."

"Good suggestion, Loulie! I'll go right after dinner, if you'll hurry it up. But as long as those that have gone North write back here that they're picking ten-dollar bills off the bushes, and about it being a regular Utopia for them, this unrest is going to keep up."

II

Down at the commissary, Mr. William Twickenham, manager, clerk, postmaster, and bookkeeper, found time hanging heavy on his hands since so many of the negroes—his chief patrons—had gone. He paced idly up and down the store, where his footfalls echoed among the half empty shelves. Stock had been allowed to run down, being replenished only in driblets of the barest necessities.

Mr. Twickenham was an old bachelor and a former sport, who had run through a handsome patrimony to the benefit of the New Orleans Cotton Exchange brokers, in bucking the cotton futures market. He had also been a benefactor of a certain poker game on Royal Street, of the roulette game, of the races, and of sundry complaisant ladies descended, apparently, from the daughters of the horse leech who continually cried:

"Give! Give!"

He had been educated for the bar, but his practice had been confined to the sort with a brass foot rail—to which he took enthusiastically. Being a first cousin of Mrs. Bolivar Redmond, who was a Twickenham, family honor demanded that he should be given asylum and haven when the end of his brilliant career had come. He got forty dollars a month and a room and meals with the family, and had been there fifteen years. Mrs. Redmond called him "Cousin Willy," and so did the colonel.

He paused in his march at the end of the right-hand counter near the front door to exchange pleasantries with Bun, his pet squirrel, for whom, a few days before, he had purchased an elegant tin cage made like a Swiss chalet, with a large revolving wheel, on which Bun exercised frantically.

Tiring of Bun and his marathon against time, Cousin Willy cautiously glanced out through the front door. Nobody being in sight, he stepped behind the left-hand counter, picked up a ten-cent bottle of lemon flavoring extract, and went back to the partitioned office in the rear. Emptying the contents of the bottle into a tumbler, he added water and gulped it, with a wry face.

He had never been wholly able to reconcile himself to lemon extract. Still, in these times of scarcity, it was not nearly as dangerous as bootleg liquor—nor as expensive. It was grain alcohol, with oil of lemon and a bit of water added, and it really gave one quite a little glow after one forgot the taste. But he drew the line on vanilla.

Mr. Twickenham then wiped his mouth and carefully dropped the bottle through a knot hole in the floor behind the desk. There were hundreds of bottles down under there. Colonel Redmond swore roundly at the jobbers' last bill for lemon extract, but Cousin Willy had assured him that it was a staple, and that the negroes were passionately devoted to it, so plenty must be kept on hand.

Fortified, somewhat perked up, his faded blue eyes a bit brighter, he gave his gray mustache the old-time jaunty twist and emerged from the office. He was fervently hoping Cousin Loulie wouldn't have lemon pie for dinner. She had a fondness for that dessert, and he felt that to face lemon pie on top of lemon extract would be just about the last straw.

He raised his head and noticed Jim Jackson standing in awed amazement, watching Bun make the cylinder revolve.

"What make him go so fast, when he ain't goin' nowhar an' got nuffin' to do when he gits dere, Mist' Willy?" inquired Jim, a puzzled grin on his very, very black face.

"But he don't know he isn't getting anywhere. Maybe he thinks he is."

"Like a lot of folks—like me, f'r instance. I keeps goin' through the motions of makin' a livin', but I ain't making a bit more headway den dat squir'l."

Jim had never taken his eyes off the cage.

"World full of folks like that, Jim; but when they're dead, it don't make much difference what they had or didn't have. Did you want anything, Jim?"

"Yes, sir—want to draw a few rations. Done stretched that last draw twell dey done gone."

"What do you want?"

"Side meat, meal, flour, 'lasses, coffee, sugar, lard, grits, oatmeal—"

"Hold on! Hold on! Colonel told me to issue nothing but absolute necessities. Things look mighty bilious. Not a quarter of a force on the place—boll weevil eating up what crop there is, and him a big loser on the niggers that have run off."

"I knows times is tight on de cunnel. It's hard on de niggers, too. I's in debt, an' not a chance in dis world to get even, let alone come out ahead. My cotton's plumb lousy wid them boll weebil bugs—looks like dey breeds overnight dis showery weather."

"Sorry, Jim, but it isn't my commissary. I'll have to hold you down to side meat, meal, and molasses."

"No coffee, sugar, grits, flour, oatmeal, ner nothin'?"

"It's the best I can do, Jim."

"Mist' Willy, I has fo' little chillens. I don't mind for myse'f, an' Lucy don't mind; but if you puts chillens on short rations, it ain't good for 'em. Besides, dem po' lil young uns don't get much enjoyment in dis worl', an' eatin' is one of de fondes' things dey is of. Dey earns it, too. Dem chillens is right now out in dese showers pickin' dem weebil bugs off'n de cotton. Dey helps chop grass, pull weeds, an' hoe cotton—an' dey's entitled to draw better rations."

Sweat was running down Jim's black face as he pleaded for the children. Twickenham went back behind the counter.

"Jim, you're a good darky; and even if I am an old bachelor, I love children, black and white. They can't suffer, or have their little hearts or stomachs disappointed, as long as I've a shirt to my back. I'm going to issue all the rations you need, and I'll charge it to my own account if the colonel rows about it. If you can ever pay me back, all right. If you don't, all right. It will be enough to know I stood by the children!"

"Thanky, Mist' Willy, thanky, suh! I'll never fergit you. You always is been my fr'en'!"

Jim hung around and watched the frantic Bun's endeavors to see how fast he could revolve the cylinder, while the order was being made up. Finally, his supplies in a crocus sack on his shoulder, on Twickenham's advice he left by the door on the far side of the building, so that the colonel, glooming up on the porch, might not be prompted by the size of the load to come down and start an embarrassing inquiry.

Cousin Willy went back and refreshed himself with another bottle of lemon extract. It always made him momentarily feel his come-down—he for whom golden champagne had bubbled, for whom absinth anisettes had been prepared by deft hands, who had been among the stanchest

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patrons of Ramos's delectable and wonderful gin fizzes and the equally divine Sazerac cocktails in the heyday of New Orleans's reign as the capital of the Kingdom of Joy—the city that care forgot. Descended to lemon extract—with Jamaica ginger, when the stock became temporarily exhausted!

Though these memories were poignant, they invested Cousin Willy with a certain dignity and self-appreciation. He had been a real sport while the money lasted. He had had his moments, and they would come again when he could get somebody to back his judgment on cotton futures with cash. He was making fabulous fortunes regularly, following the quotations in the New Orleans *Picayune,* buying mentally, and keeping most painstaking memoranda of his Barmecide winnings.

III

Jim Jackson trudged homeward with his supplies. Halfway there, when he turned into the long lane leading to his cabin, he noticed Old Beck, an ancient gray mule that had been on the place for all of twenty years. Old Beck was down, to rise no more.

Jim had plowed Beck many seasons, and felt an affection for the poor old worn-out creature. He put down his sack and eased the mule's head into a more comfortable position. Then he stood, watching the animal's feeble struggles to hold on to its fleeting life.

"Well, good-by, Ole Beck!" Jim said, as if in farewell to a friend. "You's been a good ole mule, fai'ful an' steady. You's never knowed nothin' but hard work. Now, here you is, done come to de een' of your row. What has you got out of dis life? Nuffin'—an' you'll soon be daid an' gone. Jes' hard work—dat's all. Good-by, Ole Beck! If dere's a mule heaven, you sho' oughter go dere!"

He shouldered his sack and went on a little distance, his shining black face troubled. Presently he stopped, put his sack on the ground, and leaned against the rail fence. He began talking to himself, as negroes not infrequently do.

"Jim Jackson, you is like two critters. One of 'em is dat dam' fool squir'l what keeps wuckin' hisse'f in going round and round, gittin' nowhere at all. You is also like dat poor ole worn-out mule back yonder, what's done come to de een'. Nuffin' but work, an' you ain't got nowhar 't all. You been at it since you could lift a hoe, when you was six years old. You is near to fawty, an' has to beg grub for your chillen—an' sort of charity grub what you got, at that!"

He paused, took off his battered felt hat, and scratched his head thoughtfully.

"What right is you to bring dem two lil boys an' two lil gals up to be jest beasties of burden, like you an' Ole Beck?" he continued. "You can't read ner write; there ain't much chance your chillens will, neither. It ain't fair to dem, an' yit what you gwine do, wid not one red cent of cash money, and de cotton crop done gone plumb to hell 'count of dem pesky weebil bugs?"

Jim shouldered his sack again and trudged down a lane to where his one-room-and-lean-to kitchen home was located. The four children danced about him gleefully, leading him to the back door to show him a full quart of boll weevils which they had picked from the cotton plants and scalded to death.

"Dat's fine of you kids! But I reckon dere'll be as many more in de mornin'," he sighed.

"I reckon dere's twice dat many we couldn' ketch," asserted Pearline, the eldest of the children.

"Well, Lucy, honey, I managed to make a draw; but dey sho' is shuttin' down on de tenants. Times is suttingly tight, an' dey's likely to git wuss."

Lucy received the news in surly silence. She was a mulatto, and had a resentful, complaining streak in her, derived from some poor white trash overseer ancestor. There were ambitions within her that never bothered Jim. He was pure African, with a sunny optimism that was never submerged for long. Lucy was loud-mouthed, high-tempered, and dissatisfied, and she ruled Jim, who had found long ago that the easiest path to peace was to let her have her way.

Back at the big house, Colonel Redmond was telling his wife of the conference of four plantation owners.

"It was a fine suggestion of yours, Loulie. I think we see daylight ahead now. We'll coöperate and build a nice new schoolhouse where the four places corner. That will put it within a mile and a half of all the tenants on each place. We agreed to pay the salary of a good teacher, who will preach, too. We'll build a new church and repair the cabins. We determined to employ more wages hands, and to pay cash—that is, to use them in our work half of the time, giving them the other half for their own crops. We've also determined to put in two hundred acres apiece of alfalfa next spring; to pitch a late crop of corn this year, and some cowpeas, and to cut and bale hay coöperatively. We've got to have more labor, so we will employ an agent to recruit us some more families. We won't bother with cotton for a year or so. I've got to go up to Memphis and borrow some money on the land, to carry my end of the program."

"That is fine!" agreed his wife. "Now, if you will insist upon each tenant putting in an ample garden, keeping some chickens, a pig or two, and a cow each, if possible, the burden of financing food for them until crop time will be largely taken off you—and the risk, too."

"The amendment is accepted in full, Loulie. We ought to have been doing that all the time. We are on the right track now. And — oh, yes — remember what I said about Nancy? Watkins said there wasn't a soul sick on his place, and there wasn't a woman there old enough to be Nancy's grandmother!"

IV

Back at the Jackson cabin, fireflies were flickering about in the grass, and crickets were singing their evensong. Nancy, the colonel's house girl, wearily dragged herself up to the door, sat upon the step, and asked for a drink of water.

"Where at you been, gal? You looks plumb beat out," said Jim.

"Over to Climax post office."

"Climax? That's six miles there an' six back. What you doing over dere?"

"Went after my mail."

"Why don't you get your mail at Ellerslie, right at you?"

"Don' want too many folks to know my business."

"You's talkin' foolishment. Nobody payin' any 'tention to you!"

"I don' want Mister Willy and the cunnel to know."

"Fer why?"

"That's why!"

Nancy pulled from an envelope a crisp, brand-new ten-dollar bill, which had never been folded but once. She flung it toward Jim triumphantly.

"That's the second one I got. When I get the fourth one, two weeks from now, you won't see me here any more. I'm goin' Nawth!"

"Where'd you git it?" asked Lucy breathlessly.

"Remember George, what the draft took to fight them bush Germans in France?"

"Sho'ly—Aunt Liza's boy. I thought he got kilt."

"No, wounded. The government sent him to school, learned him to read and write, and paid him while he was doin' it. Then he sent his books to me, and I learned. He's at work up there, making five dollars a day."

"Says which?" blurted Jim Jackson. "Don't brag like dat, Nancy. De debbil will get you for lyin'. You means five dollars a week."

"You-all keep your mouths shut, and I'll read you what he says," returned Nancy.

Two awed nods of assent gave answer. This was the letter:

Miss Nancy Wilkins, Respt. Madam:

I takes my pen in hand to say I is well and hopes you is same. I sends another tenspot. I will send another next week, and one week after, with direcshuns how to get here, when we will be marryed, but don't let nobody know. The white folks might try to stop you.

You can get a fine Job as maid, not less than 40$ a month, maybe fifty, sixty, seventy, if you get with these rich folks what has been used to what they calls Sweeds and Wopps what don't know nothin. When a Colored Person what has been traned by quality folks down home comes up here, these folks goes crazy about them. With you making not less than 40$ and me 150$, and maybe more later, we will get along fine, but it costs a lot to live here.

These steel mills needs more hands, and will pay their railroad fair, and is useing many Colored People, which is good workers and aint no Balshyvikks like these here Bohunks and Wopps, which is getting scarce, for the Gov't won't let no more of 'em in. The boss said he wished they was all at the devil and he had Col'd People.

They is lots of our folks up here, and good schools the same that the white children go to, nice houses, and the reeson I dont send the money all to one time is I am byeing some Furnichure on the Extortion plan, and I have leesed a nice 2 room appartment for you and me, and the payments is sure stout. It is steam heted and nice and clean, but the nabors is nothin but Wopps and Hunkeys, wich is not fit for quality-raised folks like us to Sociate with.

These folks up here aint interested in you except your money. If you got money you is in High; if you aint you is out of Luck. Tell any of the men folks they can get jobs at once, three and a half to four dollars a day for common labor. There is one Col'd man here on the channell rolls in the steel mill makes 15$ a day, which I expect to be one too some time.

Write soon and with mutch love I am Resp'y
Your Husban soon,
George.

"Jim, it's de Promise' Land!" exclaimed Lucy, with great animation. "We got to get there!"

"How we gwine git there? No money to go nowhar or do nothin' at all!"

"Look at dese here raggedy lil chillen! Look at us! Look at dis shack! No schools for de chillen, 'cept eight miles off, and dey can't go. No chance of a crop—weebils done et it up. Same thing next year—an' de next—and de next! Why"—Lucy's voice rose shrilly—"we're just like mules. Work twell we is wore out; die an' be forgot like beasties. Rouse up, Jim—be a man! Figger some way to git us up where we'll have a chance!"

Jim shuddered, as his wife's words conjured up again the feeble, futile struggles of Old Beck at the end of his row, dying in a roadside ditch. A cold sweat beaded his brow.

"Lucy, don't go git yourse'f all excited, now. What we wants to do an' what we kin do is something else agin. I ain't got a cent, an', so far, I don't see no chance of one."

"Git dem steel mills to send you de money."

"But what about de account I owes de cunnel—over a hunderd and seventy-five dollars? De steel mills won't pay it, an' I can't pay it. De law of dis State is you can't move off de landlord's place widout first payin' him supply accounts an' rent."

"Lots of 'em is done gone," meaningly replied Lucy.

"Yeah, I know—slipped off like thiefs an' lef' de cunnel wid de bag to hold. He's hard up, too. He's been decent to us. He's paid his money out for dat grub we's et up. He's stood by us when we was sick, and he ain't never give me a unkind word, an' I don't wanter do him no dirt."

"He's made a lot off'n you, in time," sneered Lucy.

"They sure are good folks," interrupted Nancy, who was trying to avert a row. "Miss Loulie always is kind, and so is cunnel. He gets fractious sometimes, but he don't mean a thing. Still, a person is got to live they own life. I'm gittin' two dollars a week here. Get ten, at least, maybe lots more, up yonder. I got to go."

"But look at dese yere raggedy chillen, Nancy! Look at us!" shrilled Lucy. "We owes de chillen a chance. Why couldn't you go away an' make de money you owes cunnel an' send it to him, Jim?"

That was a new idea to Jim, who was no financier. It seemed a fair enough idea, and at such fabulous wages he could soon clear the debt up.

"Well," he admitted dubiously, "if I jes' had money to make a start on toward de Promise' Lan'—"

"Look here, you folks is harder up than I is," said Nancy, feeling the first effects of affluence. "I got eleven dollars saved up out of my wages. You-all take this here ten dollars—it will get you on the way. You can pay me back when you lands one of them fine jobs."

The girl handed the crisp bill to Lucy. The mulatto woman had never had ten dollars of her own all at one time. It awed her, and Jim had a sudden breathless feeling that they had burned the bridges behind them.

"Whar would it be best to go, Nancy?" queried Jim.

"That ten won't take you far, but you can stop off and work, and maybe meet up with a labor agent that will send you up and pay your fare. I'd strike for Memphis or Birmingham, first."

Nancy rose stiffly, and went on toward the big house. Jim and Lucy sat silent, overwhelmed with the sudden and unexpected turn of fortune.

V

Jim got up and began to wander about aimlessly, trying to nerve himself for the plunge. The railroad was four miles distant, the nearest station being Magnolia, which boasted a little plantation commissary, a gin, a blacksmith shop, a country general store—run by Squire Leggett, justice of the peace—and some cotton seed houses along a switch track. Jim did not know in which direction Memphis or Birmingham lay, nor the train schedule. He knew that the fast trains roared through Magnolia contemptuously, and that all that stopped there was a little three-coach local, one way each day.

He started to the commissary, thinking that perhaps he could artlessly pump some information out of Mr. Willy. In the dusk he passed Old Beck, stark and still. The mule's troubles were over.

Down by the mysterious dark waters of the bayou a whippoorwill was iterating its eerie song. There were sonorous basses from bullfrogs along sedgy banks. A screech owl lit on the chimney of a deserted cabin and mewed shiveringly.

Cold chills careered up and down Jim's backbone. It was a sure sign of death to the house where an owl sounded its cry three times. Perhaps this meant that some of Josh Jamison's folks had died among the perils to which they had decamped up North months before.

Jim was glad to emerge into the light streaming through the door of the commissary. There was Mr. Willy, standing by, admiring the unbelievable exertions of Bun spinning his wheel. Jim was rather struck with a similarity in the appearance of the manager and his pet. Mr. Willy had a retreating chin much like Bun's, a sloping forehead, and a sort of perky way about him; only he was not at all energetic.

"Come in, Jim! Devilish glad to see you. It's lonesome here since all the niggers have gone. Come in!"

There was a tinge of boisterous hilarity in Mr. Willy's greeting. His face was rather red, and he rocked slightly upon heel and toe in maintaining equilibrium.

"Sho' is glad to see you, Mist' Willy. I want some 'dvice."

"I never give advice unless I am duly fortified—retained, I might say in legal parlance, James, even if I provide the retainer. Come back here, J-J-J-him!"

He wrestled valiantly with a hiccup, almost bested it, and then it detonated like the back-fire of a flivver.

In the back office, he produced a dusty glass and handed it to Jim. Into it he emptied a bottle of vanilla extract. Into his own he emptied lemon.

"A gen-gennelman never drinks alone, if he can help it," gravely observed Mr. Willy. "It is permissible to do so with a valued and faithful family retainer, and on proper basis as such. I give you vanilla, Jim, because you have not strong prejudices, nor memories of a downfall to embitter your cup. I have. Moreover, the stock of lemon must be con-con-conserv-hed!" He exploded again on the last word. "Down with it!"

"Sho' is a noble dram!" Jim smacked appreciatively. "Lawdy, if I had money I'd buy me a dozen cans of dese yer oily minners — sardeens, you calls 'em — an' a dozen bottles of dat dere vanilly, an' I sho' would have a time!"

The incriminating evidence was duly disposed of through the knot hole.

"Now, James, what is biting you?" inquired the host, deftly rolling a cigarette with brown paper and perique tobacco.

The alcoholic content of the vanilla was giving Jim courage and volubility.

"Mist' Willy, I went home, and de chillen had a full quart of dem weebil bugs dey picked. I look at dat cotton field. The bugs is got it. I got no more chance of makin' what I owe de cunnel dan a rabbit has of passin' th'oo hell an' not scorchin' his fur!"

"James, there are many families on Ellerslie in your fix. I don't know what we are going to do. Jobbers are hollering for money owing for stock, and there is none—and only one gross of lemon extract left!"

"I hears niggers is makin' big money in de towns. S'pose I leave my folks here, go to town, get a good job, an' begin payin' de cunnel off, so much a week?"

In his lemonized state of optimism, Mr. Twickenham said he thought it was a very fine idea. From him the information was obtained that the local train to Memphis went North at 6.35 A.M., and that the fare was two dollars; but he cautioned Jim not to mention that he had furnished this bit of advice.

Back home, in high excitement, Jim commanded Lucy to cook up some of the rations as lunch for him until he got to Memphis. He began sorting his clothes to make up a bundle, and Lucy fell to making corn bread and frying meat.

"Well, I better be leavin' soon, so's I'll be dere when de train comes," suggested Jim.

"Wait a minute! I'll be ready."

"What you mean?"

"You reckon I gwine stay here widout you? We'd starve!"

"Oh, no, you wouldn't! It would look bad, de whole crowd leavin'."

"Don't keer how it looks!"

"But, Lucy, I means to be hones', an' pay de cunnel."

"We ain' gwine hender you. I'll take in washin' an' help."

"It looks like we skippin' out."

"Don't keer, I tole you once!"

"Dem chillen can't walk de fo' miles at night," Jim weakly argued, changing his tactics.

" You carry lil Josie, an' I'll carry Woodrow. Pearline an' George Washin'ton kin walk."

" Cunnel will sho' think we tryin' to beat him!"

" Oh, shut up. I got de money. If I don't go, you can't go."

Jim gave it up. Lucy was always contentious and determined, and it had become a habit with him to defer for the sake of peace.

" Well, if we got to pack de chillen, de sooner we starts de better!"

VI

THERE was nothing to leave—no stock, no chickens, no pigs, not even a dog. The front door was closed from the outside about one o'clock, and, with the sleepy, frightened children, mother and father started down the lane on the great adventure. As they passed Old Beck, stiff and stark now, and visible in the wan light of the moon in its last quarter, Jim's heart leaped exultantly.

" We ain't gwine work ourse'fs to death an' die in de ditch like worn-out mules! We gwine have a chance, an' we gwine give these chillen a chance!" he whispered to Lucy.

" In de Promise' Lan'—praise de Lawd!" she answered fervently.

The terrified elder children clung to the hands of their parents, and stumbled along sleepily. The road lay through dank swamps, through black forests. Great owls hooted derisively at the pilgrims, and cackled in eldritch laughter. There were vague, stealthy noises out in the canebrakes. From a patch of darkness a pair of luminous green eyes glared. Jim hurled a stone, and something crashed through the vegetation, fleeing.

At length, before dawn, they arrived at Magnolia Station. As it became light enough to see, a dozen or more negroes could be noted, furtively slipping about the outskirts of the little settlement, dodging behind the cotton seed storage sheds by the switch track, and generally acting as if to be observed was the very least of their present ambitions. The Jim Jacksons, however, blundered right along to the little boxlike station building of two rooms.

A fat, unctuous, and very black man, with a long coat known as a " jimswinger," and much affected by the clerical colored brothers, approached. Jim had noticed him conferring with sundry of the dodging crowd.

" Where is you bound to, brother?" the fat man inquired in saccharine accents.

" Memphis—up Nawth," Jim answered vaguely.

" Well, now, if you is lookin' for employment at good wages, I has been empowered to offer jobs to folks workin' in de mines, de iron furnaces, de steel mills, an' so on, over to Bummin'ham—three dollars a day."

" Ain't got money 'nuff to go to Bummin'ham," said Jim.

" But we 'vances de railroad fare, brother. I would be proud to have you jine us. All dese bretheren an' sisteren is goin' along wid me."

Jim conferred with Lucy.

" Is dere any chance to take in washin's an' sich?" she demanded.

" Dear sister, dere is nothin' else but. De preparation of clean gyarments is a great industry—pays well, too. So much smoke an' soot in Bummin'ham, white folks has to wear lots of clo'es, an' de washin's is big."

" We'll go wid you," announced Lucy.

" I is Elder Hunt. I is a general 'vance agent of better times for colored folks."

" Well, elder, you gwine pay de fare?" asked Jim.

" Sho'ly, brother—sho'ly!"

The ticket agent — a clerk over in the general store—finally came to open the window. The elder was right there, hauling an impressive wad of bills from his pocket. All his new wards crowded into the waiting room, and had their eyes glued on that roll of money.

" Hold on there! Are you a labor agent?"

The question came from a white man at the door of the colored waiting room. He wore a wide-brimmed felt hat, boots, and a belt on which there hung a scabbard, inhabited by an impressive old-style blue steel revolver.

" Who—me?" innocently replied Elder Hunt, turning and smiling blandly.

" No—you! Where you takin' these folks?"

" Lawsy, boss, I ain't takin' 'em nowhar. Dey jes' ain't used to travelin', and axed me to buy deir tickets."

" Where you-all goin'?" demanded the man of the crowd.

There was a profound silence.

" Answer me, damn it! Where—why,

derned if this isn't Jim from over at Ellerslie! Where you bound, Jim?"

"Bummin'ham, boss."

"Got a receipt from the colonel? You and him fixed up your accounts all right?"

"Well, in a way, suh. Bugs done et up de cotton, an' I'm goin' off to get a job an' pay him."

"Le's see your receipt, or permit, then."

"I didn't know I had to have a paper."

"Sure have! Got to have a clearance or permit from the landlord, under the law in this State. Jim, I sorter think you were fixing to skin out. I'll have to hold you until I get in touch with the colonel. I'm the constable of this beat. Where'd you first see this fat boy?"

He indicated Elder Hunt, who was now perspiring profusely and wore an anxious expression.

"He axed me if I wanted a job in Bummin'ham, an' he would advance de money to git dere on," replied Jim, innocently spilling the beans.

"A-ha! Reverend, consider yourself under arrest on the charge of enticing labor. If you haven't a license, that will be another charge."

The constable took out his gun and held it carelessly, ready for emergencies, as he maintained his strategic position outside the one door.

"Hey, Walter, step over and ask the squire to come over here an' bring some blank affidavits. I got about half the niggers in this beat penned up in here, and I can't leave."

The ticket agent obligingly did so, and Squire Leggett ambled over with a fountain pen and the blanks, which he proceeded to fill out. Jim's headed the list.

In the midst of it an automobile drove up, and Jim's teeth began chattering as he saw Colonel Bolivar Redmond descend. The colonel was on his way to Memphis to raise a few thousand dollars by mortgage, to carry out the new program. Jim thought the colonel was after him.

"I've got one of your families in here, colonel. He says you-all are financial and O. K. How about it?" asked the constable.

The colonel was angry.

"Why, Jim, you black scoundrel! I thought you'd be about the last man on my place to play me a low-down trick like this!"

"Cunnel, I didn't see no chance of payin' you from de crop. I swear I didn't mean to beat you out of one red cent. I just wanted to get to work and make some money."

"Jim, this hurts me—actually hurts me. I thought you were a higher class man than to sneak off this way. It isn't so much the amount you owe me. I'm just downright disappointed and grieved."

"Cunnel, if I'd 'a' come to you, you wouldn't have seen it like I seen it. No other chance in de world!"

"It has been a bad year, Jim, and last year was bad, and we all suffered; but next year we may all make a clean-up. I think things are going to be better for you folks now. We can all pull together and come out on top. Now you go back home, and—"

"Sorry, colonel, but I've arrested this whole outfit, and they've got to face the charge. I've some costs coming, too."

Constable Scott had made a killing.

"Well, Jim, they've got you dead to rights. Nothing to do but plead guilty—but I'll stand by you, like I always do for my colored folks. I'll sign your bond. You'll take the plea now and just enter it up later on the docket, won't you, judge?"

Squire Leggett was dubious.

"Kind of irregular, colonel."

"I've got to catch this train, and it's due in three minutes—"

"Oh, all right, then! Jim, do you plead guilty to the charge of attempting to run off without having settled landlord and supply bills?"

"Yes, suh, jedge, I reckon dat's hit," Jim answered shamefacedly.

"I'll fine you one hundred dollars, with one hundred days in jail, and the costs."

"Oh, my Lawd! Oh, my Lawd!" screeched Lucy.

The children began to add their frightened wailings.

"Shet up dat racket! Didn't you hear my white folks say he gwine sign my bon' an' see me th'oo?" demanded Jim. "He ain't gwine let 'em take me nowhar ner do nothin' to me!"

"Now, judge, will you kindly suspend that fine and jail sentence, during good behavior, but to be enforced any time I as bondsman surrender Jim?"

"All right, colonel. Jim, you understand that?"

"Yes, suh."

"The costs are seven dollars and seventy-five cents," suggested Constable Scott.

"I'll hand them to you when I get back from Memphis to-morrow afternoon. Now, Jim, you and Lucy and the children are tired, I reckon. Joe, come here!" The colonel beckoned his chauffeur. "You take Jim and his outfit home in the car. Jim, here's a dollar. You better go over to the store and buy a little snack for your folks, and a dime's worth of candy for the children. We'll all pull out all right, and I'm not mad with you, so just forget all this and take a fresh start."

"Sho' will, cunnel!" promised Jim, greatly relieved.

Lucy sat silent and unresponsive.

The train pulled in, and the colonel climbed aboard.

"All right, Jim—you and your folks can come out. Go on and do your trading, but stick around. I summon you as a witness in the case of this fat boy here," advised Scott.

The trial of Elder Hunt was reached later. On the testimony of Jim and some others who weakened, he was fined two hundred dollars, and sentenced to one hundred days for enticing labor, with a similar dose on the second charge of not having a license as a labor agent.

The other negroes, who were mainly from the Watkins and Richardson places, also pleaded guilty. They were held until the owners of those estates could come and pay the costs and arrange for their release. The unfortunate elder was locked up in the calaboose, with the others, until he could be taken to the county seat and put to work on the roads.

About midday all the court formalities were over. Jim and his wife invested the colonel's dollar and a part of their ten dollars in things they craved. Then they sailed grandly back to Ellerslie in the owner's car, and entered the house they had never expected to see again.

"Well, we's stopped this time, but we ain't stopped for good!" declared Lucy acrimoniously. "We gwine make it yet, but never no more to Magnolia. We gwine git away!"

"Shucks, I b'lieve I'll fight it out," replied Jim. "Some of dem niggers told me dey heard you had to work powerful hard. We ain't gwine starve here, an' cunnel said things would be better."

"We's gwine away!" Lucy was adamant. "Ain't no chance here, even in good crop years. Chillen got no chance. You better git out of that notion of stayin'. You got to go—you hear me?"

VII

Far into the night Lucy dinned it into Jim's ears, and she began again at daylight next morning. In the afternoon, Jim just had to get away from her nagging and resentful mouthing. He caught some crickets, dug some worms, and lit out for a choice place down in the canebrake, where a great black gum log had lain in the bayou for many years, and was a choice haunt for bream. He fished until dark, catching nineteen big ones; and he made another discovery, which fired his imagination.

Stopping by the commissary to exhibit his string of fish to Mr. Willy, as an excuse, he deftly began extracting the information he sought.

"Mist' Willy, where at does dis yere bayou go?"

"Why — er — it empties into Mound Bayou about sixty miles south of here."

"An' where at does dat dere Mound Bayou go?"

"Gosh, is this a geography lesson? It empties into the Yazoo River."

"An' whar at does dat river go?"

"Empties into the Mississippi just above Vicksburg."

"Is Vicksburg a big place?"

"About twenty-five thousand—why?"

"Jes' wanted to know."

"Any other information — or anything you need?"

"Yas, suh—please gimme de key to de shop. Got to fix two hoe handles in de mawnin'."

Next morning Jim was at work in the smithy, using drawing knife and files on two white oak clapboards. These he fashioned into very good paddles, which he secreted in the tall jimson weeds behind the shop. When he went to return the key, he carried two hoes with him.

The next afternoon he ostentatiously walked, with fishing poles on his shoulder, past the commissary, where the colonel stood; but he did not do much fishing when he got to the bayou. He began digging mud out of a sunken bateau made of cypress boards, flat-bottomed and wide. It had belonged to Abe Washington, who had decamped six months before.

Jim washed it out and inspected it carefully. It was sound, and floated, but it was waterlogged. Leaving it to dry out somewhat, Jim caught a string of fish and went on home.

Three nights later, carrying the frying pan, skillet, all the salt meat and salt and meal in the house, a small bucket of lard bought over at Magnolia, some coffee and the pot, a supply of fish hooks, and a plentiful lot of crickets and earthworms, Jim, Lucy, and the four children slipped along in the shadows to where the bateau was moored.

Stowing the children amidships, Lucy took the stern seat and Jim the front. They silently dipped their paddles, and started down the black bosom of the bayou. The stars gave them their only light. There was the sonorous music of bullfrogs along the banks, the derisive hooting of great owls from the adjacent swamp, the splashing and flapping of big fish.

They paddled until daylight. Then they hid the boat under a clump of willows, made their camp in the midst of a canebrake, and slept until nightfall.

They caught fish stealthily by day, watching, wary as muskrats, to see that no other human beings were around. Long dormant jungle instincts of their race rose in man and woman. They foraged by night into corn fields, and stole roasting ears. These they roasted in the shuck, or fried the corn in the pan. Some farmer's shote ventured too close, in his eagerness to garner scraps of food. Jim's arm shot out like lightning and grabbed a hind leg. His left closed over the unfortunate pig's snout before a squeal could be uttered. They barbecued that porker, and feasted upon it for three days.

They passed Yazoo City at night, and kept going until dawn.

"Shucks, Lucy! I'd ruther live this way than go to work in any old mills!" confided Jim, as he wallowed luxuriously in the shade of a dense thicket, after a royal gorge of fried catfish, corn bread, roasting ears, and coffee. "I think I'll jest stay run away an' live in de woods."

"You's gwine Nawth!" asserted Lucy, compressing her thin lips, her determination not one whit abated.

The next morning they passed a stable lot which came down to the bayou, and some chickens were out in the gray dawn, seeking the early worm. Jim placed a juicy cricket on a small bream hook, and flipped it temptingly near a fat pullet. She jumped for it, gulped, and was hauled into the boat before a squawk could warn her associates. Two more were gathered in, and a mile below the place, in an unapproachable swamp, the chickens furnished an elysian menu for a fishless day.

After paddling all night again, the voyageurs could see, through the mists of wan, early light, towering hills with houses on them down to the water's edge. Beyond lay a vast, mysterious expanse of fog and water.

"I reckon dis must be Vicksburg," suggested Jim. "Sho' is more houses dan I ever seen befo'!"

At a landing, where many other boats were moored, they sold the bateau for three dollars to a water-front darky. From him they obtained directions where a colored eating stand might be found, and they trailed on up the hill.

"Right dis way, folks! Hot cat right off de fiah!" encouraged the proprietor of one of these emporiums, as he stood in his front door.

"Not fer me! I done et so much cat twill I plumb 'shamed to look a catfish in de face," replied Lucy. "We wants a place to sleep an' reg'lar viddles, like b'iled cabbage and pot liquor."

At the Colored Travelers' Rest the Jim Jackson tribe was soon gorged with the food they craved. In their room they slept right on through the long afternoon and until dawn of the next day.

Imbibing an early cup of coffee downstairs, while Lucy washed and tidied up the children, Jim cautiously approached the subject nearest his heart, as Mrs. Callie Bobo, proprietress of the Travelers' Rest, hung about solicitously.

"Does you know any folks what is payin' de fares of good workers?" he inquired in a low voice.

"Well, suh, if dat ain't de most fortunatest thing in de world! Brother Wash-in'ton Tibbs is stoppin' right here in dis very ho-tel. He's gwine Nawth to-night wid a whole cyarload of famblies on de 'Azoo Valley train."

She beamed most encouragingly, for Brother Tibbs had offered her a dollar for every recruit she could induce.

North! The word intrigued Jim greatly. The North was the goal of their ambitions. Their North was their Utopia, and he had stumbled right into means of getting there!

"Where at is Bre'r Tibbs?"

"'Sleep. He don't git up so early."

"Ain't de ossifers liable to git him?"

"Law, no—he's too slick for 'em!" Callie declared. "Dey can' ketch him. He's shipped trainloads out o' Vicksburg, and they ain't ketched him till yit!"

"How do he head off de white folks? Dey is powerful slick deyse'fs."

"He jest perclaims he runnin' a 'scursion for de benefit of his lodge, de Lost Tribe of Isrul, up to Greenville or Clarksdale. After de train starts, why, what de white folks don't know about whar dat crowd goes won't hurt 'em!"

"Sho' is slick! Sho' is noble! I wants to see him."

Brother Washington Tibbs came in at that very moment. He was large, impressive, unctuous, well fed, voluble, and with an air of mystery about him.

Jim explained himself, after being introduced by Sis' Callie.

"Uh-uh! Well, I wants it distinct understood dis ain't no labor agent business," said Brother Tibbs severely. "Dis is a 'scursion of de Lost Tribe of Isrul, of which I is de exalted sanhedrin. We's on a pleasure trip, an' you got to belong if you goes."

"I wants to jine."

"De 'nitiation fee is one dollar per each fer adults an' adultresses—chillen half price."

"But do I git a job up Nawth?" persisted Jim.

"You sho' is as butt-headed as a bull yearlin'! Dat's up to you. I takes you Nawth and bears all de 'spense, an' puts you in touch wid folks needin' help. You don't expect me to make de 'rangements an' do your work, too, does you?"

"Oh, no, suh—no, suh!" Brother Tibbs appeared testy, and Jim was afraid he might lose this Heaven-sent opportunity. "Well, we'll jine," he said eagerly.

Brother Tibbs was all sunshine again as he spread a legal-looking document on the table.

"Jes' sign here for you an' your fambly, brother."

"I can't read," confessed Jim.

"Dis here says you jines de party. You appoints me agent to make all arrangements for you on de train. You 'grees to accept de job I finds for you up Nawth, an' to pay back de railroad fare out of your wages. When you lands on de job, you 'grees to stick for a year. Make yo' mark right here. Sis' Callie, you widness on de paper—he's tetched de pen."

The proprietress duly scrawled her name as witness.

"We leaves in a speshual coach on de 'Azoo Valley train goin' Nawth to-night at seben twenty. I'll 'tend to everything an' take your folks to de deepo. You ain't give me de 'nitiation fee yit."

Jim hastily counted it out from his depleted supply. Then, personally escorted by Sanhedrin Tibbs, the Jacksons went to the Yazoo and Mississippi Valley station, down on the water front. Tibbs became active, corralling and collecting families together, counting noses and herding the crowd. In all, there were thirty-two families in the party.

"Well, I'm goin' to order our speshual coach now. We gits in, de train folks hooks us onto de fast train, an' bingo, we's headed Nawth!" exulted Tibbs.

"Dat's de stuff—gwine Nawth!" ejaculated a middle-aged black man wearing big spectacles and carrying a Bible, to show that he was of the ministerial persuasion. "Gwine Nawth—to de Promise' Land!"

"I hopes de Los' Tribe of Isrul don't have as hard a time as dem yuther tribes what traipsed around fer fawty yeahs," commented a woman.

"Moses didn't have no steam cyars!" shrilled a yellow girl, who giggled excitedly. "We'll git there!"

The train roared into the station from New Orleans. A cautious switch engine puffed in from the yards, with a coach dimly lighted by kerosene lamps, and coupled it on to the rear of the train. Sanhedrin Tibbs bustled out of the depot, all importance, with executiveness oozing from every pore.

"Git aboard now, folks! Dis is our speshual coach. Climb in! Hurry up, now—I got our tickets all 'ranged!"

The Jim Jacksons had never ridden on a train before. To them, the faded, plum-colored cushions were the acme of luxury, and the smoky lamps a most brilliant illumination—part of the magical contraption of some jinni. When the train actually began to glide forward, Lucy could not contain herself. Her voice rose in a shrill, triumphant pæan of victory:

"I am bound fer de Promise' La-a-a-and,
I am bound for de Promise' La-and!
Oh, who will come an' go wid me-e-e-e?
I am bound fer de Promise' Land!"

It was infectious. Other voices took it up—basses and tenors, with the high, shrill, attenuated notes of the young girls flashing above the rest in a crescendo of barbaric harmony.

"Headed Nawth fer de Promise' Lan'—praise de Lawd!" shouted a man, and it set them singing again.

VIII

The music subsided after a while, the gabble of excited voices gradually died down, and children ceased whimpering. Unaccustomed to the motion, members of the party were succumbing to overpowering drowsiness.

Mile after mile was ripped off by the train, with few stops. Sanhedrin Tibbs dozed and nodded in the forward corner seat, but never lost consciousness.

The night wore on. Profound slumber had thrown its mantle of oblivion over the crowded car. In cramped, unnatural postures, the men, women, and children sprawled. One o'clock — two o'clock—three o'clock—the train drove on, headed northward.

It stopped after a while, backed up a bit, and then there was a long silence, broken only by the snores and sleep moans of the slumberers.

Lights guttered dimly, for through open windows rolled a dense fog, making an opaque and milky world outside. A man waked and roused to sitting posture. He was near the sanhedrin.

"Bre'r Tibbs, dis yer train sho' do ride easy!" he commented.

Sanhedrin Tibbs nodded, in drowsy disinclination for talk.

"Looky hyar, man, is we movin' or ain't we?" persisted the questioner, after a few minutes.

"Dunno," grunted Tibbs, seemingly in utter indifference.

"I believe we's stopped," insisted the man.

"Sho' is!" commented his wife, sticking her head out of the window. "Sho' is stopped!" she repeated, as if making a great discovery. "Is dis de Nawth?"

Time dragged interminably for the sanhedrin during the next few minutes.

"Believe I'll go out on de flatform an' look aroun'," suggested the discoverer of the easy motion.

He disentangled himself from several sleeping children, and made his way to the door. It was locked. He traversed the aisle and went to the other door. Locked!

"Look hyar, folks, we's locked in, an' de yuther part of de train is went off an' left us!" he bawled excitedly.

Heads popped up—eyes popped out.

"Says which?" demanded the exhorter.

"De train done run off an' left us!"

"Oh, shut up!" commented Sanhedrin Tibbs, with vast disgust. "De engine just gone off after coal an' water. Sit down, you dern fool country niggers! You ain't never traveled nowhar, an' you don't know nothin'. De train 'll be comin' back to git us. Knowin' you was a pack of chuckleheads, I locked de doors myself to keep you from goin' out an' fallin' off de flatform an' gittin' kilt. Here's de key!" He held it up in triumph. "Take a nap, you folks—like I is."

He ostentatiously settled himself back and closed his eyes.

The passengers subsided. In the face of such crushing superior knowledge there was nothing else to do.

Half an hour passed. The world grew lighter, but the fog held on.

"I'll go out an' see 'bout de engine, an' see whar we is at," advised Brother Tibbs, suiting his action to the word.

He unlocked the door, and carefully locked it again when he was out on the platform. Then the fog swallowed him.

"Whar you reckon we is, Jim?" asked Lucy.

"I dunno. I'll be plumb satcherfied wharever it's at."

"Huh—I dunno!" Lucy sniffed.

Suddenly Tibbs bounced up on the rear platform, apparently out of nowhere. He seemed greatly agitated. He called through the upper part of the door, where the sash had been let down.

"Hey, you folks, 'tenshun! Lissen to this telegram what I has just been handed:

"Mr. Washington Tibbs, Supreme Exalted Sanhedrin. Esteemed Sir:

"A terrible accident has happened. The rest of the train of your party is run off the bridge into the Miss. River and drownded everybody. The bridge is busted and wrecked. It cannot be repaired for two weeks, and there will be no more trains. It was a mistake that the train did not go back and get your car. The conductor forgot it, which is a mercy, or you-all would have woke up dead. Sorry to delay you, but make out the best you can, and in two weeks we will pick up your car again. "Respy,

"John W. Smith, General Supt. and Prest."

"Lawdy mussy! Jes' think what we missed!" squalled a woman.

Men surged to the door, and Tibbs handed the telegram in to them. That it was typewritten on a sending blank, and had pocket-worn creases, was not noticed.

" Sho' is a tellegraft—says 'zackly what he read!" declared the exhorter in spectacles, who was a scholar, and spelled it out.

The other travelers surged about him, and he had to read it over and over again. They gloated in its horrors.

" Well, hyar we is! We got to make 'rangements to live till de railroad bridge is fixed. I'll go see what I kin do."

Tibbs vanished again. In about fifteen minutes he returned.

" I told you folks I'd take you Nawth, didn't I?" he demanded through the upper part of the locked door.

" Sho' did!" answered several.

" Well, dis is a hundred and fifty miles nawth of Vicksburg. I can't fly you, an' I can't make trains run over busted bridges. Some genelmuns out here will hire you, part time cash as wages hands, part time your own share crops — good schools, church, plenty rations, good houses. Looks like it's take dis or starve. You-all 'pointed me to do dat when you signed up wid de Los' Tribe, so I done signed up for a year. Come on out, you folks, an' meet your new 'ployers!"

Bewildered, the negroes filed from the car. Four white men were standing near the steps. The fog was lifting.

Jim Jackson and his family trooped out, sleepy, stupid, wool-gathering. Jim paused in front of one of the men, and stood with his mouth open.

" Welcome, Jim! Hope you had a nice trip and a good vacation! Come on—there's a wagon waiting to take you over to Ellerslie. I think you'll be satisfied now!"

Jim gulped as he looked into the amused face of Colonel Bolivar Redmond.

" Howdy, cunnel? Yassir, I knows I will—sho' will. Sho' I's missed you!" he replied ingratiatingly, as he shuffled toward the waiting wagon.

INVIOLATE

" How shall I face the bandit years,
That threaten robbery and death?
How shall I strip them of the fears
With which they poison every breath?"
I asked, and thought perhaps their greed
With gold to still. In vain I tried;
They mocked the bribe, nor checked their speed.
" We'll take your youth, instead!" they cried.

In work I sought to find the way
To render them my slaves, to wring
Obedience to my will and stay
The beating of their restless wing.
But though in work I might awhile
Forget their insolence, 'twas vain;
They took my hope, and left it vile—
The labor of my hands and brain.

I had not thought of love, but when
Love came, I found I held the key
To help me win from them again
The youth and hope they'd filched from me.
And though the loved one they may take,
There's something that escapes their clutch;
The heart of love perhaps may break,
But love itself they cannot touch!

William Wallace Whitelock

A Dinner of Disenchantment

PROVING THAT A MEAL MAY BE SPICED WITH FLIRTATION AND YET REMAIN TASTELESS

By Marian Graham

"DID you ever see such absolutely improper devotion?" demanded Sheila Fraser, crossing her legs, to reveal a glimpse of a neatly rolled stocking, and waving the cigarette holder with which she habitually punctuated her remarks.

"Bad taste, I call it, really!" observed Mary Cavendish, in an accent as nearly British as three hundred years of American ancestry would allow.

The man with whom they were teaing, on the veranda of the Grantchester Country Club, looked up to see whom they were gossiping about now. A smart car had drawn up before the clubhouse, and a good-looking man with a rather serious smile had left the wheel to greet a pretty young woman who had run down to meet him. They seemed unaffectedly glad to see each other, and they kissed unashamedly before the very eyes of their critics.

Then the man assisted the woman into the car with that tender courtesy so different from the kind that springs solely from convention, and again took the wheel. As the car moved off, the man on the veranda decided that the pretty young woman sighed contentedly, as she leaned as close as she could to her escort.

"Charming, I think," he said mildly, turning to the others.

"Why, Bruce Dexter, don't be so common!" Mary exclaimed. "It's positively mid-Victorian for a man to be so devoted to his wife; and for a wife to return the same full measure of devotion is — well, Freudian!"

"Oh, they're married, then!" said Bruce. "More charming than ever. It's so rare as to be unconventional."

"Heavens, you are old-fashioned! It isn't as if they had just met after a year's separation. This happens almost every day, and the worst of it is that they really seem to enjoy it. How any two civilized people can so cut themselves off from everything and everybody is beyond me!"

Sheila shrugged her shoulders. Mary took up the attack.

"Yes, and only a few years ago, before marriage made them quite impossible, they were delightful. Stella was the livest girl in the set, and Tom was always ready to go. Now they never do anything except play tennis together, golf together, ride together, motor together—"

"If they're happy, why do you care?" Dexter interrupted.

"Bruce, don't be sentimental! Think of society! Think of one's duty to one's fellows, and all that sort of thing! What did we fight the war for? I say that couples like the Sterlings are a dangerous, oligarchic menace. Think of a world composed of such people! Why, nothing would ever get done. There would be no coöperation anywhere—no community spirit."

"And no country clubs," observed Dexter, with quiet irony.

"Certainly not."

"Think of a world without country clubs!" he went on mournfully. "It would be too utopian. I mean—"

"You're being clever, Bruce Dexter. I know what 'utopian' means, if Sheila doesn't," accused Mary; "but everybody knows you're a bolshevik at heart."

"I don't care what it means," Sheila insisted; "but I do say that happy marriages are undermining society."

The happily married menace—otherwise Tom and Stella Sterling—furnished the country clubbers with a daily topic of conversation. Grantchester is one of those communities where the residents have nothing to do, plenty of time, and little to think about. Every one is scrupulously observant of every one else's clothes, car, home, and social life. Every one is religiously unhappy, often in defiance of nature, and a blasé boredom is considered the grand manner. Enthusiasm of any kind violates a sacred taboo.

For five years Tom and Stella Sterling had been happily married. The longest previous record in what was contemptuously called the endurance contest was three years. Divorce, downright infidelity, or at least flirtation, was the accepted thing. Happily married people were cordially disliked, because they bored everybody but themselves.

II

Sheila Fraser and Mary Cavendish would have been astonished, as well as gratified, if they had known that even as they subjected the Sterlings to their well bred scorn, Tom was contemplating an indiscretion. They had almost given up hope; but that very afternoon, before leaving the office, Tom had answered a jingling telephone, and had heard the voice of a girl whose name and face he had kept locked in his heart for many years.

When the smart Grantchester folk had jollied him for his lack of human susceptibility, and had waxed sarcastic because of his devotion to Stella, he had smiled knowingly and thought of Ilonka. Ilonka constituted Tom's purple past. If he had not had her to think about, the perpetual public scorn of his love for Stella might have driven him to the acquisition of a more recent if less colorful madness.

Everything about Ilonka was colorful, even her rich, throaty voice. When she had called Sterling on the telephone that afternoon, her " Hello, Tom!" had been as lingering and dulcet as any message the wires had ever carried—quite a contrast to the crisp girlishness of Stella. Ilonka was—well, caressing. Stella was straightforward.

Ilonka was so different from Tom that she had won his love, years before. Stella was so like him, and yet so complementary, that she, too, had won his love; but Stella had been his wife for five years. Ilonka had been his fiancée for four months, and Ilonka had the advantage of more than six years' absence.

If the Sterlings had lived anywhere but in Grantchester, Tom would probably have forgotten Ilonka; but such a premium was placed upon devilishness that the sound of her voice had sent a delightful, tickling sensation up and down his spine. His past had returned to him, more glamorous than ever. He had not been allowed to forget her, and now, as he rode beside Stella, he was glad that Ilonka had not forgotten him.

He had joyously made a dinner engagement with her. They were to dine, to-morrow evening, in one of their old haunts, where garish but respectable Grantchester would never find them. Speaking with Ilonka, it had been easy to forget Stella. Now it was difficult; and it was even harder to explain to his wife that he was dining out with a friend.

Tom could count the times he had not dined with Stella, during those five years, on the fingers of one hand. He had never wanted to dine with any one else before. Stella was far too charming a companion for that.

He was tempted to put off telling her until the next day. It would then be easy to telephone to her, and to present the stereotyped excuse that fell so glibly from the lips of the other men of Grantchester—a business associate, in the city overnight, had to be entertained. Stella would believe it, of course, as she believed everything he told her; but for that very reason it seemed a bit cowardly.

" Anything doing to-morrow night?" he asked, after they had ridden a long way in silence.

" The Garfield dance," said Stella. " I thought we'd go there for just a little while—they'll expect that much—and then go home; but if you would rather not—"

" Fact is, dear, I was planning to stay in town." The lie fell easily into the place that Stella's words had made for it. " A chap came in from the Seattle office to-day, and he rather expects me to entertain him. Thought I'd take him to dinner to-morrow, and to a show, and get away as soon as I can. I'd rather take you "—it hurt him to say that now, but he was in the habit of being affectionate and saying so — " but, you see he's not just the right sort. Pretty crude!"

" Oh, that's all right, beloved. Then I'll stay home and read until you come—if you're not too late. I don't want to go to the Garfields', but people are beginning to forget to invite us. That's the curse of being happily married. No one knows how we do it!"

Stella's happy, girlish laughter stung Tom—he was such an inexperienced trickster—and for the first time the confiding pressure of her hand on his arm annoyed him.

Still, he reflected conscientiously, he was not altogether a liar. There *was* a man from Seattle, and he did expect to be entertained, and he was a bit crude. That much was true; but for just a moment Tom wished he had said, quite frankly:

"Stella, an old flame of mine turned up to-day. I haven't seen her in six years. Once we were engaged. I'm curious—and intrigued, rather. I'm taking her to dinner to-morrow—do you mind?"

He thought he knew what Stella would reply:

"Of course not, dear! Only you must promise to tell me about it when you come home. Such meetings are always funny."

But if he did that, there would be no thrill in it, nothing to think about as a solace when the Grantchester rounders got sarcastic; and he had been hoarding his boyish memory of Ilonka for a long time.

III

SUNDRY annoying business problems were presented to Tom Sterling the next day, but he did not solve them with his usual clear, concentrated assurance. Indeed, he found it impossible to concentrate. He was looking forward to the dinner with feverish anticipation, and with an equally feverish fear that Stella would learn of it.

He despised himself for deceiving her, and then tried to shake off that feeling with a smirk of self-satisfaction in his devilishness; but he was ill cast for the rôle of philanderer, and his forthright mind had not been tutored in the school of deceit.

He perspired freely when he called up Signora Mori and ordered dinner in a semi-private booth. He had not seen the *signora* for a long time, but she remembered him at once. She also remembered Stella.

"Ah, Mr. Sterling, you dine with me once more! With the charming Mrs. Sterling, is it?" A romantic Italian laugh came from the *signora's* broad bosom. "A long time—perhaps once more you capture romance, here in my little place!"

"No, *signora,* it is not Mrs. Sterling, but some one else. Perhaps you remember, if you have not discreetly forgotten. It is Ilonka—"

"Oh!" In that monosyllable were mingled disapproval, reproach, scorn, and discretion, for first of all Signora Mori was a hostess. "Very well, it will be arranged."

The receiver clicked while Tom was still listening.

"Gee!" he muttered. "Maybe I shouldn't go to Mori's."

And yet Ilonka was inseparably linked, in his memory, with the little Italian restaurant. His youth was there, and all of the dreams that had been his in those gay, care-free days when nothing mattered but dinner, a bottle of wine, and the particular "thou" who shared it with him. It seemed a long, long time ago, after five years of dreamless, commonplace Grantchester.

Bill Murray, the man from Seattle, entered his office like a blast of wind across Puget Sound. Tom was still dubious from the telephone conversation, but Bill slapped him on the back, called him "old scout," thrust a cigar at him, and made himself comfortable on the other side of the desk.

"Well, Tom, old-timer!" he exploded. "We've done a fine year's business out in God's country, and everything's settled for another one bigger yet. That's what I say—double the sales every year; and we'll do it out there. We've got the organization and the pep to put it over; but, say, all work and no play, you know! I like little old Manhattan a lot. What do you say to a night of it, hey? Come on, the old man just slipped me a bonus that 'll make a noise even in this town. Let's go!"

Another slap on the back brought Tom back to earth.

"Eh? What did you say? Oh, about that Hampton contract—"

"Never mind that, old dear! I'll land Hampton. What I say is, let's go out and licker up. Let's have one good old time. It's my party—one night of freedom before I go back to Seattle and the wife!"

A prodigious wink and a moist revolution of the fat cigar followed this suggestion.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Bill," Tom stammered; "but really I—I can't make it. You see—you see, this is my wedding anniversary, and I've really got to go home. You know how those things are—big celebration and everything!"

He sighed heavily after getting it out. How the deuce could he lie so easily? Perhaps it was because he was thinking of

Stella, and wishing he was really going home. Anyway—

"Well, that's tough on me, Tom! Darn it, I was counting on a great time. I only see New York once a year. Well, maybe I can stir up a little party on my own, hey?"

Murray had already got up. Tom was heartily glad to be rid of him; but it wasn't exactly good business to treat him this way. He would probably expect to be invited to the anniversary affair, at least.

"Oh, I say, Bill, I'd ask you to come out, but I don't think there'll be much jazz in the party. It's a dull crowd out there. Here's an idea—you go and see Stanton, in the advertising department. There's the boy to show you the sights, a lot better than an old married man like me. That's the stuff!"

"That's fine; I'll do that. We'll have a party yet. Say, Tom, if we get jailed or anything, bail us out, will you? I'm off!"

"I'm sorry I can't make it, Bill, but you know—"

"Sure, I know. Don't I have one of those anniversaries every year myself?"

IV

During the rest of that awful day, Tom was tempted more than once to phone to Ilonka and call it off. Only his pride prevented him, and his fear of what the Grantchester fellows would say if they should ever learn about it.

He got through the day somehow, and presented himself at Ilonka's apartment hotel at half past six. She met him in the foyer, bundled in a shapeless mass of leopard skin coat, and gave him a gloved hand. He held it for a long moment, because he knew she expected him to, and pressed it warmly. She returned his pressure boldly, and still clung to his hand as they went out of doors and into the taxi.

"Tom, dear!" she sighed, as the taxi moved forward. "It has been so very long, my own, and I see tired lines in your face. Oh, Tom!"

She swayed toward him, and her free hand stroked his arm. Tom felt no emotion, but he was uncomfortable.

"Yes," he agreed stupidly. "It has been a long time, Ilonka. I'm awfully glad to see you again."

"Only glad? Oh, *mon cher!* I am so very happy to be with you!"

It wasn't at all chivalrous of Tom to think so, but nevertheless the thought came that Ilonka had used those very words many times before. How else could she give them that too perfect inflection?

"Yes, it's great!" he said, but there wasn't any inflection in his tone.

"Aren't you going to kiss me, dearest?"

Ilonka turned her face up to his, and managed the difficult feat, in a jolting taxi, of placing her hand upon his shoulder, so that it would not disarrange her coiffure and would at the same time achieve the proper kissing angle.

"Why—why, sure!"

He bent down to kiss her cheek, but Ilonka took his face in her hands and brought his lips to hers. As their lips met, Tom had the feeling that the kiss was only of the lips. It wasn't real, like Stella's.

He was relieved when the car halted before the dim entrance to Mori's, and he accomplished a fair imitation of gayety as he helped Ilonka out. The *signora* met them just inside, and led them to their booth. She displayed no more cordiality toward Tom than was necessary and toward Ilonka none at all. The place seemed to Tom far less charming than of old.

He helped Ilonka out of her leopard skin —why would she wear furs like that?—and beheld her in a startlingly low-cut gown of black velvet. The gown made him uncomfortable. He saw that Ilonka's long neck had lost its fine lines, and her shoulders had become too plump. She was not at all the girl he had cherished in his memory—that slender, tigerish creature of flame and color. No, she was becoming plump; but she still affected tigerish gowns. He felt that he might be looking at the mother of that lithe, graceful creature whom he had once loved.

Had he loved her? It all began to seem distant and hazy, much more vague than the reality of his dream of her.

His card was on file at Mori's—which is another way of saying that he could buy liquor there at the current prices; but one cocktail was enough, surely, and there was no reason for Ilonka having two, especially when she had not indulged years ago.

He looked at her more critically after the cocktails. He couldn't help it. The curve of her lips wasn't so firmly molded as it had been, and her eyes had lost their bright, enthusiastic glow. After two drinks, though, they began to sparkle.

What should they talk about? Yesterday he had dreamed of so many things to say to her; but now he sat silent, with a fixed smile that he tried to keep from being cynical, and looked at her.

She reached across the table and took his hand, pressing it. He noted that the arm she held out was soft and fat. He couldn't help thinking of the white, firm, girlish arms of Stella—muscled in tennis and golf, yet soft and round and tender as those of a mother. He could always find something to talk about with Stella, or they could be silent together without being at all uncomfortable.

V

"TELL me, Tom dear"—Ilonka broke the silence as she fished an olive out of her second cocktail—"have you suffered as I have suffered for all the things we left undone?"

How was he to answer that? If he were candid, he would be contemptible. He hesitated, and then began to lie as gracefully as he could. My, but he was lying a lot to-day!

"Yes," he confessed. "I have thought of you often, and of the old days when we were together so much."

His words sounded lifeless to him, but Ilonka took them up at once.

"Oh, my poor Tom! How often I have yearned for you! How much I have suffered! Through Europe and South America, wherever I have sung, during the two years that I have spent out West, in San Francisco and Seattle, with that terrible opera company! How I have missed you! How often I have regretted that we did not marry! We came so close to it, my own!"

"Yes, we did—and now I am married," he announced for her information, although she knew it, and also as a defense against a renewed attack.

"Ah, yes—I have heard of it. It is too bad, too. You must have been so unhappy with your little bourgeoise. Some one out West—let me see, it was in Seattle, I think—yes, a man named Murray told me of it. I knew him very well, and he consoled me in my unhappiness. Tom, I wept, wept, wept!"

"Murray—of Seattle? What's his first name?"

"Billy, I used to call him. Billy! He was very kind to me, after I knew you were married—very kind."

Tom felt the need of a third cocktail, but contented himself with Chianti. So she knew Bill Murray, and he had been very kind to her! Of course, Bill was all right in his way—a good business man, and all that; but Tom couldn't imagine—well, he couldn't imagine Stella allowing a man like Bill Murray to be kind to her, ever.

"Why don't you sit beside me—as you used to? You seem so far away!"

Tom got up heavily and took his place beside Ilonka. She leaned against him caressingly, and her arm slipped up over his shoulder. He removed it and kissed her hand, holding it in his, to prevent further embraces.

Then he began to talk, in an attempt to awaken her interest in something else. He tried music, first, out of deference to her profession; but he found that she knew little of music, except gossip about other professionals whom she disliked or envied. Then he tried plays, but she was only interested in the current divorces of the theatrical world. Books she never read, and her talk of them was most inane.

Tom gave it up, and drank a great deal more than he wanted. It had the effect of making him very solemn, and he began to make mordant, cynical remarks that were not at all nice, in response to Ilonka's elaborate expressions of devotion. They succeeded in boring each other remarkably well, and Signora Mori, passing by now and then as the meal progressed, smiled in benign satisfaction.

VI

THEY were both relieved when a noisy uproar in another part of the dining room gave them something besides each other to listen to. Boisterous songs were coming from a booth on the other side of the room. Tom and Ilonka simultaneously recognized one of the voices. It was unmistakably like a Puget Sound foghorn, and belonged to no one but Bill Murray.

"Billy!" cried Ilonka, immediately forgetting her passion for Tom.

"My God!" groaned Tom, full of remorse and good resolutions.

The foghorn of Puget Sound had heard. Now he descended upon them, saw Ilonka, and slapped her heartily on her bare, fat shoulder.

"Onky, ol' girl, this is a mos' agreeable surprise! I'm delighted—delighted, my dear!"

Murray put a possessive arm across her shoulders, and tried to bring her to her feet. Instead, he sank down beside her. Then he discovered the presence of Tom Sterling.

"Aha, Tommy! This is the way you celebrate wedding an'vers'ry! Aha! Don't blame you a bit! Didn't I celebrate mine las' year in the company of Onky?"

To prove it, he leaned over and kissed her. She swayed against him, and laughed heartily.

Tom felt helpless and sick. He wanted to get out of the place, he wanted to go home. He pulled out his watch and muttered something.

"Ilonka, I've really got to go," he announced. "Last train, you know. Shall I take you home now, or shall—"

Ilonka looked up at him with a glass in her hand.

"Say, do you think I'd leave now?" she demanded. "With Billy just getting here, and the night still young? I should say not! Good-by, old thing, good-by!"

Tom touched her hand, bowed to Murray, and left the booth. As he went he heard a loud smack, followed by the words—

"Good riddance!"

He almost ran from the place, pulling out a bill for Signora Mori on the way.

The *signora* took the bill and bade him good night.

"And you will bring Mrs. Sterling some time?" she said. "I should like to see her again. She is a very fine girl."

"You bet! And say, *signora,* don't let any one know about this—this—will you?"

"Oh, I shall be discreet, and so will you, I think, hereafter!"

"I'm never going to eat another meal unless Stella's with me," said Tom.

With that he plunged out into the street, caught a taxi, and fled to the station. He had to get home to Stella, he had to tell her what a fool he had been. He hoped she was still up reading. The Grantchester crowd could all go to the devil. He never wanted to talk to any woman but Stella!

The veranda veterans were again in session at the Grantchester Country Club. The affair of the season was approaching, and Sheila Fraser and Mary Cavendish were out to make it a huge success. One of their problems was the coaching and staging of a pageant, and they ran through the list of club members to select the right person to do it.

"Stella Sterling, of course!" exclaimed Sheila. "Why didn't I think of her before? No one could do it so well. Do you remember—"

"But haven't you heard?" whispered Mary, in the tone that gossips reserve for exclusive news.

"Scandal? Oh, tell me!"

"Scandal? My dear, the very worst we have ever had in Grantchester! Oh, the Sterlings will be ostracized, that's all there is to it. And you haven't heard?"

"Don't be dramatic—tell me! Of course I haven't heard."

"Well — well," began Mary, hesitating to the full limit of suspense, "Tom and Stella have gone to Florida on their yearly honeymoon!"

VESPERS

THERE are so many ways of saying
  That I love you—
The tender deed to fit the praying,
  The bond when dark blots out the blue;
The honest heart wherein are straying
  The searching tendrils of the true.

There are so many ways of proving
  That love is all—
The patient living and the loving,
  The breathless answer to a call;
The pulse of evening, faintly moving
  When sparrows fall.

Olin Lyman

It Came Out of Egypt

A SERIES OF SIX MYSTERIES FROM THE LAND OF THE NILE

By Sax Rohmer

Author of "Dr. Fu-Manchu," "The Golden Scorpion," etc.

THIRD MYSTERY—THE BATS OF MEYDUM

SALUTING each of the three in turn, the tall Egyptian passed from Dr. Cairn's room. Upon his exit there followed a brief but electric silence. Dr. Cairn's face was very stern, and Sime, with his hands locked behind him, stood staring out of the window into the palm-shaded garden of the hotel.

Robert Cairn looked excitedly from one to the other.

"What did he say, sir?" he cried, addressing his father. "It had something to do with—"

Dr. Cairn turned toward his son. Sime did not move.

"Yes," replied the doctor. "It had something to do with the matter which has brought me to Cairo."

"You see," said Robert, "my knowledge of Arabic, I regret to say, is practically nothing."

Sime now turned in his slow and heavy fashion, and directed a dull gaze upon the last speaker.

"Ali Mohammed," he explained slowly, "who has just left, had come down from the Fayum to report a singular matter. He was unaware of its real importance, but it was sufficiently unusual to disturb him, and Ali Mohammed es Suefi is not easily disturbed."

Dr. Cairn dropped into an armchair, nodding toward Sime.

"Tell him all that we have heard," he said. "Of course, we stand together in this affair."

"Well," continued Sime, in his deliberate fashion, "when we struck our camp beside the Pyramid of Meydum, Ali Mohammed remained behind, with a gang of workmen, to finish off some comparatively unimportant work. He is an unemotional person. Fear is alien to his composition. It has no meaning for him; but last night something occurred at the camp—or what remained of the camp—which seems to have shaken even Ali Mohammed's iron nerve."

Robert Cairn nodded, watching the speaker intently.

"The entrance to the Meydum Pyramid—" continued Sime.

"One of the entrances," interrupted Dr. Cairn, smiling slightly.

"There is only one entrance," said Sime dogmatically.

Dr. Cairn waved his hand.

"Go ahead," he said. "We shall have time to discuss these archæological details later."

Sime stared dully, but went on without further comment.

"The camp was situated on the slope immediately below the only known entrance to the Meydum Pyramid. One might say that it lay in the shadow of the building. There are tumuli in the neighborhood—part of a prehistoric cemetery—and it was work in connection with this which had detained Ali Mohammed in that part of the Fayum. Last night, about ten o'clock, he reports, he was awakened by an unusual sound, or series of sounds. He came out of the tent into the moonlight, and looked up at the pyramid. The entrance was a good way above his head, of course, and quite fifty or sixty yards from the point where he was standing; but the moon-

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beams bathed that side of the building in dazzling light, so that he was enabled to see a swarm of bats whirling out of the pyramid."

"Bats?" ejaculated Robert Cairn.

"Yes. There is a small colony of bats in this pyramid, of course; but the bat does not hunt in bands, and the sight of these bats flying out from the place was one which Ali Mohammed had never witnessed before. Their concerted squeaking was very clearly audible. He could not believe that it was this which had awakened him, and which had awakened the ten or twelve workmen who also slept in the camp, for these men were now clustering around him, and all looking up at the side of the pyramid. Fayum nights are strangely still. Except for the jackals and the village dogs, and a few other sounds to which one grows accustomed, there is nothing — absolutely nothing—audible. In this stillness, then, the flapping of the bats made quite a disturbance overhead. Some of the men were only half awake, but most of them were badly frightened. They began to compare notes, with the result that they determined upon the exact nature of the sound that had aroused them. It seemed almost certain that this had been a dreadful scream —the scream of a woman in her last agony."

He paused, looking from Dr. Cairn to his son, with a singular expression upon his habitually immobile face.

"Go on," said Robert Cairn.

Slowly Sime resumed.

"The bats had begun to disperse in various directions, but the panic which had seized upon the camp does not seem to have subsided so readily. Ali Mohammed confesses that he himself felt almost afraid —a remarkable admission for a man of his class to make. Picture these fellows, then, standing looking at one another, and very frequently up at the opening in the side of the pyramid. Then the smell began to reach their nostrils—the smell which completed the panic, and which led to the abandonment of the camp."

"The smell? What kind of smell?" jerked Robert Cairn.

Dr. Cairn turned himself in his chair, looking fully at his son.

"I know that odor—it is the smell of Hades, boy!" he said grimly, and turned away again.

"Naturally," continued Sime, "I can give you no particulars on that point; but it must have been something very fearful to have affected the Egyptian native. There was no breeze, but it swept down upon them, this poisonous smell, as if borne by a hot wind."

"Was the exhalation actually hot?" Robert Cairn inquired.

"I cannot say. But Ali Mohammed is positive that it came from the opening in the pyramid. It was not in disgust, apparently, but in sheer, stark horror, that the whole crowd of them turned tail and ran. They never stopped and never looked back until they came to Rekka, on the railway."

"That was last night?" questioned Cairn, after a short silence.

His father nodded.

"The man came in by the first train from Wasta," he said. "We have not a moment to spare!"

Sime stared at him.

"I don't understand—"

"I have a mission," said Dr. Cairn quietly. "It is to run to earth, to stamp out, as I would stamp out a pestilence, a certain thing—I cannot call it a man—Antony Ferrara. I believe, Sime, that you are at one with me in this matter?"

Sime drummed his fingers upon the table, frowning thoughtfully, and looking from one to the other of his companions under his lowered brows.

"With my own eyes," he said, "I have seen something of this secret drama which has brought you, Dr. Cairn, to Egypt; and, up to a point, I agree with you regarding Antony Ferrara. You have lost all trace of him?"

"Since leaving Port Said," said Dr. Cairn, "I have seen and heard nothing of him; but Lady Lashmore, who was an intimate—and an innocent victim, God help her!—of Ferrara in London, after staying at the Semiramis in Cairo for one day, departed. Where did she go?"

"What has Lady Lashmore to do with the matter?" asked Sime.

"If what I fear be true—" began Dr. Cairn, and broke off. "But I anticipate. At the moment it is enough for me that, unless my information is at fault, Lady Lashmore left Cairo by the Luxor train at half past eight o'clock yesterday."

Robert Cairn looked in a puzzled way at his father.

"What do you suspect, sir?" he said.

"I suspect that she went no farther than Wastâ," replied Dr. Cairn.

"Still I do not understand," declared Sime.

"You may understand later," was the answer. "We must not waste a moment. You Egyptologists think that Egypt has little or nothing to teach you. The Pyramid of Meydum lost interest as soon as you learned that no treasure could be found in it. How little you know what it really contained, Sime! Mariette did not suspect. Sir Gaston Maspero does not suspect. The late Sir Michael Ferrara and I once camped by the Pyramid of Meydum, as you have camped there, and we made a discovery."

"Well?" prompted Sime, with growing interest.

"It is a point upon which my lips are sealed, but—do you believe in black magic?"

"I am not altogether sure that I do," replied Sime.

"Very well, you are entitled to your opinion; but although you appear to be ignorant of the fact, the Pyramid of Meydum was formerly one of the strongholds—the second greatest in all the land of the Nile—of ancient Egyptian sorcery. I pray Heaven I may be wrong, but in the disappearance of Lady Lashmore, and in the story of Ali Mohammed, I see a dreadful possibility. Ring for a time-table. We have not a moment to waste!"

II

Rekka was a mile behind.

"It will take us an hour yet," said Dr. Cairn, "to reach the pyramid, although it appears so near."

Indeed, in the violet dusk, the great Pyramid of Meydum seemed already to loom above them, although it was quite four miles away. The narrow path along which they trotted their donkeys ran through the fertile lowlands of the Fayum. They had just passed a village, amid an angry chorus from the pariah dogs, and were now following the track along the top of the embankment.

Where the green carpet merged ahead into the gray ocean of sand the desert began, and out in that desert, resembling some weird work of nature rather than anything wrought by the hand of man, stood the gloomy and lonely building ascribed by the Egyptologists to the Pharaoh Snofru, of the fourth dynasty, the predecessor of the great Cheops.

Dr. Cairn and his son rode ahead, and Sime, with Ali Mohammed, brought up the rear of the little company.

"I am completely in the dark, sir," said Robert Cairn, "respecting the object of our present journey. What leads you to suppose that we shall find Antony Ferrara here?"

"I scarcely hope to find him here," was the enigmatical reply; "but I am almost certain that he is here. I might have expected it, and I blame myself for not having provided against—this."

"Against what?"

"It is impossible, Rob, for you to understand this matter. Indeed, if I were to publish what I know—not what I imagine, but what I know—about the Pyramid of Meydum, I should not only call down upon myself the ridicule of every Egyptologist in Europe, but I should be accounted mad by the whole world."

His son was silent for a time.

"According to the guide books," he said at length, "it is merely an unfinished and empty tomb."

"It is empty, certainly," replied Dr. Cairn, "or the apartment known as the King's Chamber is now empty; but even the so-called King's Chamber was not empty once, and there is another chamber in the heart of the pyramid which is not empty now."

"If you know of the existence of such a chamber, sir, why have you kept it secret?" asked Robert Cairn.

"Because I cannot prove its existence. I do not know how to enter it, but I know it is there. I know what it was formerly used for, and I suspect that last night it was used for that same unholy purpose again, after a lapse of perhaps four thousand years. Even you would doubt me, I believe, if I were to tell you what I know, if I were to hint at what I suspect. No doubt, in your reading, you have met with Julian the Apostate?"

"Certainly, I have read of him. He is said to have practiced necromancy."

"When he was at Carra, in Mesopotamia, he retired to the Temple of the Moon, with a certain sorcerer and some others. His nocturnal operations concluded, he left the temple locked and the door sealed, and placed a guard over the gate. He was killed in battle, and never returned to Carra; but when, in the reign of Jovian, the seal was broken and the temple opened, a body was found hanging by its hair. I will spare you the particulars. It was a case of that most awful form of sorcery—anthropomancy!"

An expression of horror had crept over Robert Cairn's face.

"Do you mean, sir, that this pyramid was used for similar purposes?"

"In the past it has been used for many purposes," was the quiet reply. "The exodus of the bats points to the fact that it was again used for one of those purposes last night — the exodus of the bats, and something else."

Sime, who had been listening to this strange conversation, cried out from the rear:

"We cannot reach it before sunset!"

"No," replied Dr. Cairn, turning in his saddle; "but that does not matter. Inside the pyramid, day and night make not the slightest difference."

Having crossed a narrow wooden bridge, they turned fully in the direction of the great ruin, pursuing a path along the opposite bank of the cutting. They rode in silence for some time, Robert Cairn deep in thought.

"I suppose that Antony Ferrara actually visited this place last night," he said suddenly; "although I cannot follow your reasoning. What leads you to suppose that he is there now?"

"This," answered his father slowly. "The purpose for which I believe him to have come here would detain him at least two days and two nights. I shall say no more about it, because, if I am wrong, or if for any reason I am unable to establish my suspicions as facts, you would certainly regard me as a madman if I had confided those suspicions to you."

Mounted upon donkeys, the journey from Rekka to the Pyramid of Meydum occupies fully an hour and a half. The glories of the sunset had merged into the violet dusk of Egypt before the party passed the outskirts of the cultivated land and came upon the desert sands. The mountainous pile of granite, its peculiar orange hue a ghastly yellow in the moonlight, now assumed truly monstrous proportions, seeming like a great square tower rising in three stages from its mound of sand to some three hundred and fifty feet above the level of the desert.

There is nothing more awesome than to find one's self at night, far from all fellow men, in the shadow of one of those edifices raised by unknown hands, by unknown means, to an unknown end; for, despite all the wisdom of our modern inquirers, these stupendous relics remain unsolved riddles set to posterity by a mysterious people of the past.

Neither Sime nor Ali Mohammed was of highly strung temperament. Neither was subject to those subtle impressions which more delicate organizations receive, as the nostrils receive an exhalation, from such a place; but Dr. Cairn and his son, though each in a different way, now came within the mysterious aura of this temple of the dead ages.

The great silence of the desert—a silence like no other in the world; the loneliness, which must be experienced to be appreciated, of that dry and tideless ocean; the traditions which had grown up like fungi about this venerable building; and, lastly, the knowledge that it was associated in some way with the sorcery, the unholy activity, of Antony Ferrara, combined to chill them with a supernatural dread which called for all their courage to combat.

"What now?" said Sime, descending from his mount.

"We must lead the donkeys up the slope," replied Dr. Cairn, "where those blocks of granite are, and tether them there."

In silence, then, the party commenced the tedious ascent of the mound by the narrow path to the top, until at about one hundred and twenty feet above the surrounding plain they found themselves actually under the wall of the mighty building. The donkeys were made fast.

"Sime and I," said Dr. Cairn quietly, "will enter the pyramid."

"But—" objected his son.

"Apart from the fatigue of the operation," continued the doctor, "the temperature in the lower part of the pyramid is so tremendous, and the air so bad, that in your present state of health it would be absurd for you to attempt it. Apart from this, there is a possibly more important task to be undertaken here, outside."

He turned his eyes upon Sime, who was listening intently.

"While we are penetrating to the interior by means of the sloping passage on the north side, Ali Mohammed and yourself must mount guard on the south side of the pyramid."

"What for?" said Sime rapidly.

"For the reason," replied Dr. Cairn, "that there is an entrance to the first stage."

"But the first stage is nearly seventy feet above us. Even assuming that there is an entrance there—which I doubt—escape by that means would be impossible. No one could climb down the face of the pyramid from above; no one has ever succeeded in climbing up. For the purpose of surveying the pyramids, a scaffold had to be erected. Its sides are so steep that they are quite unscalable."

"That may be," agreed Dr. Cairn; "but, nevertheless, I have my reasons for placing a guard over the south side. If anything appears upon the stage above, Rob—*anything*—shoot, and shoot straight!"

He repeated the same instructions to Ali Mohammed, to the evident surprise of the latter.

"I don't understand at all," muttered Sime; "but as I presume you have a good reason for what you do, let it be as you propose. Can you give me any idea of what we may hope to find inside this place? I only entered once, and I am not anxious to repeat the experiment. The air is unbreathable, the descent to the level passage below is stiff work, and, apart from the inconvenience of navigating the lower passage—which, as you probably know, is only sixteen inches high—the climb up the vertical shaft into the tomb is not a particularly safe one. I exclude the possibility of snakes," he added ironically.

"You have also omitted the possibility of Antony Ferrara," said Dr. Cairn.

"Pardon my skepticism, doctor, but I cannot imagine any man voluntarily remaining in that awful place."

"Yet I am greatly mistaken if he is not there!"

"Then he is trapped!" Sime observed grimly, examining a Browning pistol which he carried. "Unless—"

He stopped, and an expression, almost of fear, crept over his stoical features.

"That sixteen-inch passage," he muttered, "with Antony Ferrara at the farther end!"

"Exactly!" said Dr. Cairn. "But I consider it my duty to the world to proceed. I warn you that you are about to face what is probably the greatest peril you will ever be called upon to encounter. I do not ask you to do this. I am quite prepared to go alone."

"That remark was wholly unnecessary, doctor," said Sime, rather truculently. "I suggest that the other two should proceed to their post."

"But, sir—" began Robert Cairn.

"You know the way," said the doctor, with an air of finality. "There is not a moment to waste. Although I fear that we are already too late, it is just possible we may be in time to prevent a dreadful crime."

The tall Egyptian and Robert Cairn went stumbling off among the heaps of rubbish and broken masonry, until an angle of the great wall concealed them from view. Then the two who remained continued the climb yet higher, following the narrow, zigzag path leading up to the entrance of the descending passage. Immediately under the square black hole they stood and glanced at each other.

"We may as well leave our outer garments here," said Sime. "I note that you wear rubber-soled shoes. I shall remove my boots, as otherwise I should be unable to obtain any foothold."

Dr. Cairn nodded, and without more ado proceeded to strip off his coat—an example which was followed by Sime. It was as he stooped and placed his hat upon the little bundle of clothes at his feet that the physician detected something which caused him to stoop yet lower, and to peer at a small, dark object on the ground with a strange intentness.

"What is it?" jerked Sime, glancing back at him.

Dr. Cairn, from a hip pocket, took out an electric lamp, and directed the white ray upon something lying on the splintered fragments of granite.

It was a bat, a fairly large one, and a clot of blood marked the place where its head had been; for the creature of the night had been decapitated!

As if anticipating what he would find there, Dr. Cairn flashed the ray of the lamp all about the ground in the vicinity of the entrance to the pyramid. Scores of dead bats, headless, lay there.

"For God's sake, what does this mean?" whispered Sime, glancing apprehensively into the black entrance beside him.

"It means," answered Cairn, in a low voice, "that my suspicion, almost incredible though it seems, was well founded. Steel yourself against the task that is before you, Sime. We stand upon the borderland of strange horrors."

Sime hesitated to touch any of the dead bats, surveying them with an ill concealed repugnance.

"What kind of creature," he whispered, "has done this?"

"One of a kind that the world has not known for many ages—the most evil kind of creature conceivable—a man devil!"

"But what does he want with bats' heads?"

"The cynonycteris, or pyramid bat, has a leaflike appendage beside the nose. A gland in this secretes a rare oil. This oil is one of the ingredients of the mysterious incense which is never named in the magical writings."

Sime shuddered.

"Here," said Dr. Cairn, proffering a flask. "This is only the overture. No nerves!"

The other nodded shortly, and poured out a peg of brandy.

"Now," said Dr. Cairn, "shall I go ahead?"

"As you like," replied Sime quietly, and again quite master of himself. "Look out for snakes! I will carry the light, and you can keep yours handy in case you may need it."

III

Dr. Cairn drew himself up into the entrance. The passage was less than four feet high, and generations of sand storms had polished its sloping granite floor so as to render it impossible to descend except by resting one's hands on the roof above and gradually lowering one's self, foot by foot.

A passage of this description, descending at a sharp angle for more than two hundred feet, is not particularly easy to negotiate, and progress was slow. At every five yards or so Dr. Cairn would stop, and, turning on his pocket lamp, would examine the sandy floor and the crevices between the huge blocks that lined the passage, in quest of those faint tracks which warn the traveler that a serpent has recently passed that way. Then, replacing his lamp, he would proceed.

Sime followed in like manner, employing only one hand to support himself, while with the other he constantly directed the ray of his pocket torch past his companion, and down into the gulf of utter blackness beneath.

Out in the desert the atmosphere had been sufficiently hot, but now with every step it grew hotter and hotter. That indescribable smell, as of a decay begun in remote ages, that rises with the impalpable dust in these mysterious labyrinths of ancient Egypt which never know the light of day, rose stiflingly. At some forty or fifty feet below the level of the sand outside, respiration became difficult, and the two paused, bathed in perspiration and gasping for air.

"Another thirty or forty feet," panted Sime, "and we shall be in the level passage. There is a sort of artificial cavern there, you may remember, where, although we cannot stand upright, we can sit and rest for a few moments."

Speech was exhausting, and no further words were exchanged until the bottom of the slope was reached. Here the combined lights of the two pocket lamps showed them that they had reached a tiny chamber irregularly hewn in the living rock. It was less than four feet high, but, its jagged floor being level, they were enabled to sit for a while.

"Do you notice something unfamiliar in the smell of the place?" Dr. Cairn asked his companion.

Sime nodded, wiping the perspiration from his face the while.

"It was bad enough when I came here before," he replied hoarsely. "It is terrible work for a heavy man; but to-night the place seems to be reeking. I have smelled nothing like it in my life!"

"Correct!" returned Dr. Cairn grimly. "I trust that, once clear of this place, you will never smell it again."

"What is it?"

"It is the incense," was the reply. "Come! The worst of our task is before us yet."

The continuation of the passage now showed as an opening no more than fifteen to seventeen inches high. It was necessary, therefore, to lie prone upon the rubbish of the floor, and to proceed serpent fashion. An explorer could not even employ his knees, so low was the roof, but was compelled to progress by clutching at the irregularities in the wall, and by digging his elbows into the splintered stones he crawled upon.

For three yards or so they proceeded in this way. Then Dr. Cairn suddenly lay still.

"What is it?" whispered Sime.

A threat of panic was in his voice. He dared not conjecture what would happen if either should be overcome in that evil-smelling burrow, deep in the bowels of the ancient building. At that moment it seemed to him, absurdly enough, that the weight of the giant pile rested upon his back, was crushing him, pressing the life out from his body as he lay there prone, with his eyes fixed upon the rubber soles of Dr. Cairn's shoes, directly in front of him.

But softly came a reply:

"Do not speak again. Proceed as quietly as possible, and pray Heaven we are not expected!"

Sime understood. With a malignant enemy before them, this hole in the rock through which they crawled was a certain death trap. He thought of the headless bats, and reflected that he, in crawling out into the shaft ahead, must lay himself open to a similar fate.

Dr. Cairn moved slowly onward. Despite their anxiety to avoid noise, neither he nor his companion could control their heavy breathing. Both were panting for air.

The temperature was now deathly. A candle would scarcely have burned in the vitiated air; and above that odor of ancient rottenness which all explorers of the monuments of Egypt know, rose that other indescribable exhalation which seemed to stifle one's very soul.

Dr. Cairn stopped again.

Sime, having performed this journey before, knew that his companion must have reached the end of the passage, that he must be lying, peering out into the shaft, for which they were making. He extinguished his lamp.

Again Dr. Cairn moved forward. Stretching out his hand, Sime found only emptiness. He wriggled forward, in turn, as rapidly as possible, all the time groping with his fingers.

"Take my hand," came a whisper. "Another two feet forward, and you can stand upright."

He proceeded, grasped the hand which was extended to him in the impenetrable darkness, and, panting, temporarily exhausted, rose upright beside Dr. Cairn, and found that there was space enough to stretch his cramped limbs.

Side by side they stood, mantled about in such a darkness as cannot be described; in such a silence as dwellers in the busy world cannot conceive; in such an atmosphere of horror that only a man morally and physically brave could have retained his composure.

Dr. Cairn bent to Sime's ear.

"We must have the light for the ascent," he whispered.

"Have your pistol ready, then," returned Sime. "I am about to press the button of the lamp."

A shaft of white light shone suddenly up the rocky sides of the pit in which they stood, and lost itself in the gloom of the chamber above.

"On to my shoulders," said Sime. "You are lighter than I. Then, as soon as you can reach, place your lamp on the floor above, and mount up beside it. I will follow you."

Dr. Cairn, taking advantage of the rugged walls, and of the blocks of stone amid which they stood, mounted upon Sime's shoulders.

"Could you carry your revolver in your teeth?" asked the latter. "I think you might hold it by the trigger guard."

"I proposed to do so," replied Dr. Cairn grimly. "Stand fast!"

Gradually he rose upright upon the other's shoulders. Then, placing his foot in a cranny of the rock, and with his left hand grasping a protruding fragment above, he mounted yet higher, all the time holding the lighted lamp in his right hand. Upward he extended his arms, and upward, until he could place the lamp upon the ledge above his head, where its white beam shone across the top of the shaft.

"Mind it does not fall!" panted Sime, craning his head upward to watch these operations.

Dr. Cairn, whose strength and agility were wonderful, twisted around sidewise, and succeeded in placing his foot on a ledge of stone on the opposite side of the shaft. Resting his weight upon this, he extended his hand to the lip of the opening, and drew himself up to the top, where he crouched in the light of the lamp.

Then, wedging his foot into a crevice a little below him, he reached out his hand to Sime. The latter, following much the same course as his companion, seized the extended hand, and soon found himself beside Dr. Cairn.

Impetuously he snatched out his own lamp and flashed its beams about the weird apartment in which they found themselves—the so-called King's Chamber of the pyramid. Right and left leaped the searching rays, touching the ends of the wooden beams, which, practically fossilized by long contact with the rock, still survive in that sepulchral place. Above and below and all around he directed the light of his lamp—upon the litter covering the rock floor, upon the blocks of the higher walls, upon the frowning roof.

They were alone in the King's Chamber!

IV

"THERE is no one here!"

Sime looked about the place excitedly as he spoke.

"Fortunately for us!" answered Dr. Cairn.

He still breathed rather heavily from his exertions, and, moreover, the air of the chamber was disgusting; but otherwise he was perfectly calm, although his face was pale and bathed in perspiration.

"Make as little noise as possible," the physician whispered.

Now that the place proved to be empty, Sime began to cast off the dread that had possessed him in the passageway; but he found something ominous in his companion's words.

Dr. Cairn, stepping carefully over the rubbish of the floor, advanced to the east corner of the chamber, waving to Sime to follow. Side by side they stood there.

"Do you notice that the abominable smell of the incense is more overpowering here than anywhere?"

Sime nodded.

"You are right. What does that mean?"

Dr. Cairn directed the ray of light down behind a little mound of rubbish into a corner of the wall.

"It means," he said, with a subdued expression of excitement, "that we have got to crawl in there!"

Sime stifled an exclamation.

One of the blocks of the bottom tier was missing at this point—a fact which Dr. Cairn had not detected before by reason of the presence of the mound of rubbish before the opening.

"Silence again, Sime!" whispered the physician.

He lay down flat, and, without hesitation, crept into the gap. As his feet disappeared, Sime followed.

Here it was possible to crawl upon hands and knees. The passage was formed of square stone blocks. It was but three yards or so in length; then it suddenly turned upward at a tremendous angle of about one in four. Square footholds were cut in the lower face.

The smell of incense was almost unbearable now.

Dr. Cairn bent to Sime's ear.

"Not a word, now!" he said. "No light—pistol ready!"

He began to mount. Sime, following, counted the steps. When they had mounted sixty, he knew that they must have come close to the top of the original mastabah, and close to the first stage of the pyramid. Despite the deep shaft beneath, there was little danger of falling, for one could lean back against the wall while seeking for the foothold above.

Dr. Cairn mounted very slowly, fearful of striking his head upon some obstacle. On the seventieth step he found that he could thrust his foot forward, and that no obstruction met his knee. They had reached a horizontal passage.

Very softly the doctor whispered back to Sime:

"Take my hand! I have reached the top."

They entered the passage. The heavy, sickly sweet odor almost overpowered them, but, grimly set upon their purpose, they crept on, after a single moment of hesitancy.

A fitful light rose and fell ahead of them. It gleamed upon the polished walls of the corridor in which they now found themselves—that inexplicable light burning in a place which had known no light since the dim ages of the early Pharaohs!

The events of that incredible night had afforded no such emotion as this. This ghastly light was the crowning wonder, and, in its dreadful mystery, the crowning terror of Meydum.

When first the lambent light played upon the walls of the passage, both men stopped, stricken motionless with fear and amazement. Sime, who would have been prepared to swear that the Meydum Pyramid contained no apartment other than the King's Chamber, was now past mere wonder, past conjecture; but he could still fear.

Dr. Cairn, although he had anticipated this phenomenon, temporarily fell a victim to its supernatural character.

They advanced. They looked into a square chamber of about the same size as the King's Chamber. In fact, although they did not realize it until later, this second apartment, no doubt, was situated directly above the first.

The only light was that of a fire burning in a tripod, and by means of this illumination, which rose and fell in a strange manner, it was possible to perceive at least some of the details of the place. At the moment, however, the doctor and his companion were not concerned with these. They had eyes only for the black-robed figure beside the tripod.

It was that of a man, who stood with his back toward them, chanting monotonously in a tongue unfamiliar to Sime. At certain points in his chant he would raise his arms in such a way that, clad in the black robe, he assumed the appearance of a gigantic bat. Each time that he acted thus, the fire in the tripod, as if fanned into new life, would leap up, casting a hellish glare about the place. Then, as the chanter dropped his arms again, the flame would drop also.

A cloud of reddish vapor floated low in the apartment. There were a number of curiously shaped vessels upon the floor. Against the farther wall, rendered visible only when the flames leaped high, was some motionless white object, apparently hung from the roof.

Dr. Cairn drew a hissing breath and grasped Sime's wrist.

"We are too late!" he said strangely.

He spoke at a moment when his companion, peering through the ruddy gloom of the place, had been endeavoring to perceive more clearly that ominous shape which hung, horrible, in the shadow. He spoke, too, at a moment when the man in the black robe raised his arms—when, as if obedient to his will, the flames leaped up fitfully.

Although Sime could not be sure of what he saw, there came to him a recollection of words recently spoken by Dr. Cairn. He remembered the story of Julian the Apostate, the emperor who was also a necromancer. He remembered what had been found in the Temple of the Moon after Julian's death. He remembered that Lady Lashmore—

And thereupon he experienced such a nausea that, but for the fact that Dr. Cairn gripped him, he must have fallen.

Tutored in a materialistic school, Sime could not even now admit that such monstrous things could be. With a necromantic operation taking place before his eyes; with the unholy perfume of the secret incense all but suffocating him; with the dreadful oracle dully gleaming in the shadows of that temple of evil — his reason would not accept the evidences. Any man of the ancient world—of the Middle Ages—would have known that he was looking upon a professed wizard, upon an adept magician, who, according to one of the most ancient formulas known to mankind, was seeking to question the dead respecting the living.

But how many modern men are there capable of realizing such a thing? How many who would accept the statement that such operations are still performed, not only in the East, but in Europe? How many who, witnessing this mass of Satan, would accept it for verity, would not deny the evidence of their very senses?

He could not believe such an orgy of wickedness possible. A pagan emperor might have been capable of these things, but to-day—wondrous is our faith in the virtue of "to-day"!

"Am I mad," he whispered hoarsely, "or—"

A thinly veiled shape seemed to float out from that still form in the shadows. It assumed definite outlines. It became a woman, beautiful with a beauty that could only be described as awful.

She wore upon her brow the uræus of ancient Egyptian royalty. Her sole garment was a robe of finest gauze. Like a cloud, like a vision, she floated into the light cast by the tripod.

A voice—a voice which seemed to come from a vast distance, from somewhere outside the mighty granite walls of that unholy place—spoke. The language was unknown to Sime, but the fierce hand grip upon his wrist grew fiercer. That dead tongue, that language unspoken since the dawn of Christianity, was known to the man who had been the companion of Sir Michael Ferrara.

In upon Sime swept a swift conviction—that one could not witness such a scene as this and live and move again among one's fellow men. In a sort of frenzy, then, he wrenched himself free from the physician's detaining hand, and launched a retort of modern science against the challenge of ancient sorcery.

Raising his Browning pistol, he fired—shot after shot—at that batlike shape which stood between himself and the tripod.

A thousand frightful echoes filled the chamber with a demon mockery, booming along those subterranean passages beneath, and bearing the conflict of sound into the hidden places of the pyramid which had probably known no sound for untold generations.

" My God!"

Vaguely he became aware that Dr. Cairn was seeking to drag him away. Through a cloud of smoke he saw the black-robed figure turn. Dream fashion, he saw the pallid, glistening face of Antony Ferrara. The long evil eyes, alight like the eyes of a serpent, were fixed upon him. He seemed to stand amid a chaos, in a mad world beyond the borders of reason, beyond the dominions of God; but to his stupefied mind one astounding fact found access.

He had fired at least seven shots at the black-robed figure, and it was not humanly possible that all could have gone wide of their mark; yet Antony Ferrara still lived!

Utter darkness blotted out the evil vision. Then there was a white light ahead; and, feeling that he was struggling for sanity, Sime managed to realize that Dr. Cairn, retreating along the passage, was crying to him, in a voice rising almost to a shriek, to run—run for his life—for his salvation!

" You should not have fired!" he seemed to hear.

Unconscious of any contact with the stones — although afterward he found his knees and shins to be torn and bleeding—he was scrambling down that long, sloping shaft.

He had a vague impression that Dr. Cairn, descending beneath him, sometimes grasped his ankles and placed his feet into the footholes. A continuous roaring sound filled his ears, as if a great ocean were casting its storm waves against the structure around him. The place seemed to rock.

" Down flat!"

Some sense of reality was returning to him. Now he perceived that Dr. Cairn was urging him to crawl back along the short passage by which they had entered from the King's Chamber.

Heedless of hurt, he threw himself down and pressed on.

There came a blank, like the sleep of exhaustion which follows delirium. Then Sime found himself standing in the King's Chamber, with Dr. Cairn, who held an electric lamp in his hand, beside him, and half supporting him.

The realities were suddenly reasserting themselves.

" I have dropped my pistol!" muttered Sime.

He threw off the supporting arm, and turned to the corner behind the heap of débris, where was the opening through which they had entered the satanic temple.

No opening was visible!

" He has closed it!" cried Dr. Cairn. " There are six stone doors between here and the place above. If he had succeeded in shutting one of them before we—"

" My God!" whispered Sime. " Let us get out! I am nearly at the end of my tether!"

Fear lends wings, and it was with something like the lightness of a bird that Sime descended the shaft.

" On to my shoulders!" he cried, when he reached the bottom.

Dr. Cairn lowered himself to the foot of the shaft.

" You go first," he said.

He was gasping, as if nearly suffocated, but he retained a wonderful self-control. Once over into the borderland, and bravery assumes a new guise. The courage which can face physical danger undaunted, melts in the fires of the unknown.

Sime, his breath whistling sibilantly between his clenched teeth, hauled himself through the low passage with incredible speed. The two worked their way arduously up the long slope. They saw the blue sky above them.

V

" SOMETHING like a huge bat," said Robert Cairn, " crawled out upon the first stage. We both fired—"

Dr. Cairn raised his hand. He lay exhausted at the foot of the mound.

" He had lighted the incense," he replied, " and was reciting the secret ritual. I cannot explain; but your shots were wasted. We came too late—"

" Lady Lashmore—"

" Until the Pyramid of Meydum is pulled down, stone by stone, the world will never know the true story of her fate. Sime and I have looked in at the gate of hell. Only the hand of God plucked us back. Look!"

The physician pointed to the companion of his nocturnal adventure. Sime lay, pallid, with closed eyes — and his hair was abundantly streaked with white.

FOURTH MYSTERY — FLOWERING OF THE LOTUS

TO Robert Cairn it seemed that the boat train would never reach Charing Cross. His restlessness was appalling. He perpetually glanced from his father, with whom he shared the compartment, to the flying Kentish landscape with its vistas of hop poles. Dr. Cairn, although he exhibited less anxiety, was, nevertheless, strung to highest tension.

That dash from Cairo homeward had been something of a fevered dream to both men. To learn, while one is searching for a malign and implacable enemy in Egypt, that that enemy, having secretly returned to London, is weaving his evil spells around "some we loved, the loveliest and the best," is to know the meaning of an ordeal.

In pursuit of Antony Ferrara—the incarnation of an awful evil—Dr. Cairn had deserted his practice and had left England for Egypt. Now he was hurrying back again; for while he had sought in strange and dark places of that land of mystery for Antony Ferrara, the latter had been darkly active in London!

Again and again Robert Cairn read the letter which, surely as a royal command, had recalled them. It was from Myra Duquesne. One line in it had fallen upon them like a bomb, had altered all their plans, had shattered the one fragment of peace remaining to them.

In the eyes of Robert Cairn, the whole universe centered around Myra Duquesne. She was the one being in the world of whom he could not bear to think in conjunction with Antony Ferrara. Now he knew that Antony Ferrara was beside her, was, doubtless at this very moment, directing those black arts of which he was master, to the destruction of her mind and body—perhaps of her very soul.

Again he drew the worn envelope from his pocket and read that ominous sentence, which, when his eyes had first fallen upon it, had blotted out the sunlight of Egypt:

> You will be surprised to hear that Antony is back in London, and is a frequent visitor here. It is quite like old times.

"Keep calm, my boy," urged the doctor. "It can profit us nothing, it can profit Myra nothing, for you to shatter your nerves at a time when real trials are before you. You are inviting another breakdown. Oh, I know it is hard; but for everybody's sake try to keep yourself in hand."

"I am trying my best, sir," replied Robert hollowly.

Dr. Cairn nodded.

"We must be diplomatic," he continued. "That James Saunderson proposed to return to London, I had no idea. I thought that Myra would be far outside the black maelstrom in Scotland. Had I suspected that Saunderson would come to London, I should have made other arrangements."

"Of course, sir, I know that; but even so we could never have foreseen this."

Dr. Cairn shook his head.

"To think that while we have been scouring Egypt from Port Said to Assuan, he has been laughing at us in London!" he said. "Directly after the affair at Meydum he must have left the country—how, Heaven only knows. That letter is three weeks old, isn't it?"

Robert Cairn nodded.

"What may have happened since—what may have happened!"

"You take too gloomy a view. James Saunderson is a Roman guardian. Even Antony Ferrara could make little headway there."

"But Myra says that — Ferrara is — a frequent visitor."

"And Saunderson," replied Dr. Cairn, with a grim smile, "is a Scotsman! Rely upon his diplomacy, Rob. Myra will be safe enough."

"God grant that she is!"

At that, silence fell between them, until, punctually to time, the train slowed into

Charing Cross. Inspired by a common anxiety, Dr. Cairn and his son were first among the passengers to pass the barrier. The car was waiting for them; and within five minutes of the arrival of the train they were whirling through London's traffic to the house of James Saunderson.

It stood on Dulwich Common—a quaint backwater remote from motor bus highways. It was a rambling, red-tiled building which at one time had been a farmhouse. As the big car pulled up at the gate, Saunderson, a large-boned Scotsman, tawny-eyed, and with his gray hair worn long and untidily, came out to meet them. Myra Duquesne stood beside him. A quick blush colored her face momentarily, then left it pale again.

Indeed, her pallor was alarming. As Robert Cairn, leaping from the car, seized both her hands and looked into her eyes, it seemed to him that the girl had almost an ethereal appearance.

Something clutched at his heart and iced his blood; for Myra Duquesne seemed a creature scarcely belonging to the world of humanity — seemed already half a spirit. The light in her sweet eyes was good to see; but her fragility, and a certain transparency of complexion, horrified him.

Yet he knew that he must hide these fears from her. Turning to Mr. Saunderson, he shook him warmly by the hand, and the party of four passed by the low porch into the house.

In the hallway Miss Saunderson, a typical Scottish housekeeper, stood beaming welcome; but suddenly, in the very instant of greeting her, Robert Cairn stopped as if transfixed. Dr. Cairn also pulled up just within the door, his nostrils quivering and his clear gray eyes turning right and left, searching the shadows.

Miss Saunderson could not help noticing this sudden restraint.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked anxiously.

Myra, standing beside Mr. Saunderson, began to look frightened; but Dr. Cairn, shaking off the incubus which had descended upon him, forced a laugh, and, clapping a hand upon Robert's shoulder, cried:

"Wake up, my boy! I know it is good to be back in England again, but keep your daydreaming for after lunch!"

Robert Cairn forced a ghostly smile in return, and the odd incident promised soon to be forgotten.

"How good of you," said Myra, as the party entered the dining room, "to come right from the station to see us! And you must be expected in Half Moon Street, Dr. Cairn?"

"Of course we came to see you first," replied Robert Cairn significantly.

Myra lowered her face and pursued that subject no further.

No mention was made of Antony Ferrara, and neither Dr. Cairn nor Robert cared to broach the subject. The lunch passed off without any reference to the very matter which had brought them there that day.

It was not until nearly an hour later that Dr. Cairn and his son found themselves alone for a moment. Then, with a furtive glance about him, the doctor spoke of that which had occupied his mind, to the exclusion of all else, since first they had entered the house of James Saunderson.

"You noticed it, Rob?" he whispered.

"My God! It nearly choked me!"

Dr. Cairn nodded grimly.

"It is all over the house," he continued, "in every room that I have entered. They are used to it, and evidently do not notice it, but coming in from the clean air, it is—"

"Abominable, unclean—unholy!"

"We know that smell of unholiness," continued Dr. Cairn softly. "We have good reason to know it. It heralded the death of Sir Michael Ferrara. It heralded the death of another."

"With a just God in heaven, can such things be?"

"It is the secret incense of ancient Egypt," whispered Dr. Cairn, glancing toward the open door. "It is the odor of that black magic which, by all natural law, should be buried and lost forever in the tombs of the ancient wizards. Only two living men within my knowledge know the use and the hidden meaning of that perfume. Only one living man has ever dared to make it and use it."

"Antony Ferrara!"

"We knew he was here, boy; now we know that he is using his powers here. Something tells me that we come to the end of the fight. May victory be with the just!"

II

HALF MOON STREET was bathed in tropical sunlight. Dr. Cairn, with his hands behind him, stood looking out of the window. He turned to his son, who leaned against a corner of the bookcase in the shadow of the big room.

"Hot enough for Egypt, Rob," he said.

Robert Cairn nodded.

"Antony Ferrara," he replied, "seemingly travels his own atmosphere with him. I first became acquainted with his hellish activities during a phenomenal thunderstorm. In Egypt his movements apparently corresponded with those of the khamsin. Now"—he waved his hand vaguely toward the window—"this is Egypt in London."

"Egypt is in London, indeed," muttered Dr. Cairn. "Jermyn has decided that our fears are well founded."

"You mean, sir, that the will—"

"Antony Ferrara would have an almost unassailable case in the event of—of Myra—"

"You mean that her share of the legacy would fall to that fiend, if she—"

"If she died? Exactly."

Robert Cairn began to stride up and down the room, clenching and unclenching his fists. He was a shadow of his former self, but now his cheeks were flushed and his eyes feverishly bright.

"Before Heaven," he cried suddenly, "the situation is becoming unbearable! A thing more deadly than the plague is abroad here in London. Apart from the personal aspect of the matter—of which I dare not think—what do we know of Ferrara's activities? His record is damnable. To our certain knowledge, his victims are many. If the murder of his adoptive father, Sir Michael, was actually the first of his crimes, we know of three other poor souls who beyond any shadow of doubt were launched into eternity by the black arts of this ghastly villain."

"We do indeed, Rob," replied Dr. Cairn sternly.

"He has made attempts upon you; he has made attempts upon me. We owe our survival"—he pointed to a row of books upon a corner shelf—"to the knowledge which you have accumulated in half a lifetime of research. In the face of science, in the face of modern skepticism, in the face of our belief in a benign God, this creature, Antony Ferrara, has proved himself conclusively to be—"

"He is what the benighted ancients called a magician," interrupted Dr. Cairn quietly. "He is what was known in the Middle Ages as a wizard. What that means, exactly, few modern thinkers know; but I know, and one day others will know. Meanwhile his shadow lies upon a certain house."

Robert Cairn shook his clenched fists in the air. In some men the gesture would have seemed melodramatic; in him it was the expression of a soul's agony.

"But, sir," he cried, "are we to wait, inert, helpless? Whatever he is, he has a human body, and there are bullets, there are knives, there a hundred drugs in the pharmacopœia!"

"Quite so," answered Dr. Cairn, watching his son closely, and, by his own collected manner, endeavoring to check the other's growing excitement. "I am prepared at any personal risk to crush Antony Ferrara as I would crush a venomous scorpion; but where is he?"

Robert Cairn groaned, dropping into the big leathern armchair, and burying his face in his hands.

"Our position is maddening," continued the elder man. "We know that Ferrara visits Mr. Saunderson's house; we know that he is laughing at our vain attempts to trap him. Crowning comedy of all, Saunderson does not know the truth, and is not the type of man who could ever understand. In fact, we dare not tell him, and we dare not tell Myra. The result is that those whom we would protect are unwittingly working against us, and against themselves."

"That perfume!" burst out Robert Cairn. "That hell's incense which loads the atmosphere of Saunderson's house! To think that we know what it means!"

"Perhaps I know even better than you do, Rob. The hidden secrets of perfume are not understood nowadays; but you, from your experience, know that certain perfumes have occult uses. At the Pyramid of Meydum, in Egypt, Antony Ferrara dared—and the just God did not strike him dead—to make a certain incense. It was often made in the remote past, and a portion of it, probably in a jar hermetically sealed, had come into his possession. I once detected its dreadful odor in his rooms in London. Had you asked me, before that, if any of the hellish stuff had survived to the present day, I should emphatically have said no; but I should have been wrong. Ferrara had some. He used it all, and went to the Meydum pyramid to renew his stock."

Robert Cairn was listening intently.

"All this brings me back to a point which I have touched upon before, sir," he said. "To my certain knowledge, the late Sir Michael and yourself have delved into the black mysteries of Egypt more deeply than any men of the present century; yet Antony Ferrara, little more than a boy, has mastered secrets which you, after years of research, have failed to grasp. What does this mean, sir?"

Dr. Cairn, again locking his hands behind him, stared out of the window.

"He is not an ordinary mortal," continued his son. "He is supernormal, and supernaturally wicked. You have admitted — indeed, it was evident — that he is merely the adopted son of the late Sir Michael. Now that we have entered upon the final struggle—for I feel that this is so—I will ask you once again, who is Antony Ferrara?"

Dr. Cairn spun around upon the speaker. His gray eyes were very bright.

"There is one little obstacle," he answered, "which has kept me from telling you what you have asked so often. Although you will find it hard to believe—and you have had dreadful opportunities to peer behind the veil—I hope very shortly to be able to answer that question, and to tell you who Antony Ferrara really is."

Robert Cairn beat his fist upon the arm of the chair.

"I sometimes wonder," he said, "that either of us has remained sane. Oh, what does it mean? What can we do? What can we do?"

"We must watch, Rob. To enlist the services of Saunderson would be almost impossible. He lives in his orchid houses; they are his world. In matters of ordinary life I can trust him above most men, but in this—"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Could we suggest to him a reason—any reason but the real one—why he should refuse to receive Ferrara?"

"It might destroy our last chance."

"But, sir," cried Robert wildly, "it amounts to this—we are using poor Myra as a lure!"

"In order to save her, Rob—simply in order to save her," retorted Dr. Cairn.

"How ill she looks!" groaned the other. "How pale and worn! There are great shadows under her eyes. I cannot bear to think about her!"

"When was he last there?"

"Apparently some ten days ago. You may depend upon him to be aware of our return! He will not come there again, sir; but there are other ways in which he might reach her. Does he not command a whole shadow army? Mr. Saunderson is entirely unsuspicious. Myra thinks of the fiend as a brother; and yet she has never once spoken of him. I wonder—"

Dr. Cairn sat deep in reflection. Suddenly he took out his watch.

"Go there now," he said. "You will be in time for lunch. Remain there until I come. From to-day onward, although you should not have to bear such a strain, we must watch—watch night and day!"

III

Myra Duquesne came under an arch of roses to the wooden seat where Robert Cairn awaited her. In her plain white linen frock, with the sun in her hair and her eyes looking unnaturally large, owing to the pallor of her beautiful face, she seemed to the man who rose to greet her an ethereal creature, but lightly linked to the flesh and blood world.

An impulse which had possessed him often enough before, but which hitherto he had suppressed, suddenly possessed him anew. It set his heart beating and filled his veins with fire. As a soft blush spread over the girl's pale cheeks, and, with a sort of timidity, she held out her hand, he leaped to his feet, threw his arms around her, and kissed her—kissed her eyes, her hair, her lips.

There was a moment of frightened hesitancy. Then she resigned herself to this savage tenderness, which was more delicious in its very brutality than any caress she had ever known. It thrilled her with a glorious joy such as, she realized now, she had dreamed of, and lacked, and desired. It was a harborage to which she came, blushing, confused—but glad, conquered, and happy in the thrall of that exquisite slavery.

"Myra!" Robert whispered. "Dear Myra! Have I frightened you? Will you forgive me?"

She nodded her head quickly, and nestled upon his shoulder.

"I could wait no longer," he murmured in her ear. "Words seemed unnecessary. I just wanted you. You are everything in the world, and," he concluded simply, "I took you!"

She whispered his name very softly. What a serenity there is in such a moment, what a glow of secure happiness, of immunity from the pains and sorrows of the world!

Robert Cairn, his arms about this girl, who, from his early boyhood, had been his ideal of womanhood, of love, and of all that love meant, forgot the terrible things which had shaken his life and brought him to the threshold of death. He forgot the evidence of illness which marred the once glorious beauty of the girl, forgot the black menace of the future, forgot the wizard enemy whose hand was stretched over that house and that garden—and was merely happy.

But this paroxysm of gladness—which Eliphas Levi, last of the adepts, has so marvelously analyzed in one of his works—is of short duration, as are all joys. It is needless to recount here the disjointed sentences, punctuated with those first kisses which sweeten the memory of old age, that now passed for conversation—broken words which lovers have believed to be conversation since the world began. As dusk creeps over a glorious landscape, so the shadow of Antony Ferrara crept over the happiness of these two.

Gradually that shadow fell between them and the sun. The grim thing which loomed big in the lives of them both, refused any longer to be ignored. Robert Cairn, his arm about the girl's waist, broached the hated subject.

"When did you last see—Ferrara?"

Myra looked up suddenly.

"Over a week—nearly a fortnight ago."

"Ah!"

Cairn noted that the girl spoke of Ferrara with an odd sort of restraint, for which he was at a loss to account. Myra had always regarded her guardian's adopted son in the light of a brother. Her present attitude, therefore, was all the more singular.

"You did not expect him to return to England so soon?" he asked.

"I had no idea that he was in England," said Myra, "until he walked in here one day. I was glad to see him—then."

"And would you not be glad to see him now?" inquired Cairn eagerly.

Myra, her head lowered, deliberately pressed out a crease in her white skirt.

"One day, last week," she replied slowly, "he—came here and—acted strangely."

"In what way?" jerked Cairn.

"He pointed out to me that actually we—he and I—were in no way related."

"Well?"

"You know how I have always liked Antony. I have always thought of him as my brother."

Again she hesitated, and a troubled expression crept over her pale face. Cairn raised his arm and clasped it about her shoulders.

"Tell me all about it," he whispered reassuringly.

"Well," continued Myra, in evident confusion, "his behavior became—embarrassing. Suddenly he asked me if I could love him, not as a brother, but—"

"I understand!" said Cairn grimly. "And you replied?"

"For some time I could not reply at all. I was so much surprised, and so much—horrified. I cannot explain just how I felt about it, but it seemed horrible—it seemed horrible!"

"Of course you told him so?"

"I told him that I could never be fond of him in any different way—that I could never think of it. Although I endeavored to avoid hurting his feelings, he—took it badly. He said, in such a queer, choking voice, that he was going away—"

"Away from England?"

"Yes; and he made a strange request."

"What was it?"

"In the circumstances—you see, I felt sorry for him—I did not like to refuse him. It was only a trifling thing. He asked for a lock of my hair."

"A lock of your hair! And you—"

"I told you that I did not like to refuse. I let him snip off a tiny piece, with a pair of pocket scissors which he had. Are you angry?"

"Of course not! You were almost brought up together. You—"

"Then"—she paused—"he seemed to change. Suddenly I found myself afraid—dreadfully afraid!"

"Of Ferrara?"

"Not of Antony, exactly; but how can I explain? A most awful dread seized me. His face was no longer the face that I have always known. Something—" Her voice trembled, and she seemed disposed to leave the sentence unfinished. "Something evil—sinister—had come into it," she concluded with some difficulty.

"And since then," said Cairn, "you have not seen him?"

"He has not been here since then—no."

Cairn, his hands resting upon the girl's shoulders, leaned back in the seat, and looked into her troubled eyes with a sad scrutiny.

"You have not been fretting about him?"

Myra shook her head.

"Yet you look as if something was troubling you. This house"—he indicated the low-lying garden with a certain irritation—"is not healthily situated. It lies in a valley. Look at the rank grass—and there are mosquitoes everywhere. You do not look well, Myra."

The girl smiled a little wistful smile.

"But I was so tired of Scotland!" she said. "You do not know how I looked forward to London again. I must admit, though, that I was in better health there. I was quite ashamed of my dairymaid appearance."

"You have nothing to amuse you here," said Cairn tenderly. "You have no company, for Mr. Saunderson only lives for his orchids."

"They are very fascinating," said Myra dreamily. "I, too, have felt their glamour. I am the only member of the household whom he allows among his orchids."

"Perhaps you spend too much time there," interrupted Cairn. "That superheated, artificial atmosphere—"

Myra shook her head playfully.

"There is nothing in the world the matter with me, now that you are back!" she said, almost in her old bright manner.

"I do not approve of orchids," Cairn went on doggedly. "They are parodies of what a flower should be. Place an odontoglossum beside a rose, and what a distorted, unholy thing it looks!"

"Unholy?" laughed Myra.

"Unholy—yes! They are products of feverish swamps and deathly jungles. I hate orchids. The atmosphere of an orchid house cannot possibly be clear and healthy. One might as well spend one's time in a bacteriological laboratory."

Myra shook her head with a pretended air of seriousness.

"You must not let Mr. Saunderson hear you," she said. "His orchids are his children. Their very mystery enthralls him. Really, Robert, they are most fascinating. To look at one of those shapeless bulbs, and to speculate upon what kind of bloom it will produce, is almost as thrilling as reading a sensational novel. He has one growing now—it will probably bloom some time this week—about which he is frantically excited."

"Where did he get it?" asked Cairn, without interest.

"He bought it from a man who had almost certainly stolen it. There were six bulbs in the parcel; only two have lived, and one of these is much more advanced than the other. It is so high."

She held out her hand, indicating a height of some three feet from the ground.

"It has not flowered yet?"

"No, but the buds—huge, smooth, egg-shaped things—seem on the point of bursting at any moment. We call it the Mystery, and it is my special care. Mr. Saunderson has shown me how to attend to its simple needs. If it proves to be a new species—which is almost certain—he is going to exhibit it, and name it after me. Would you be proud of having an orchid named after—"

"After my wife?" Cairn concluded, seizing her hands. "I could never be more proud of you than I am already!"

IV

Dr. Cairn walked to the window, with its old-fashioned leaded panes. A lamp stood by the bedside, and he had tilted the shade so that it shone upon the pale face of the patient—Myra Duquesne.

Two days had wrought a dreadful change in her. She lay with closed eyes, and with ominous shadows playing upon her sunken face. Her respiration was imperceptible.

The reputation of Dr. Bruce Cairn was a well deserved one, but this case puzzled him. He knew that Myra Duquesne was dying before his eyes. He could still see the agonized face of his son, who at that moment was waiting, filled with intolerable suspense, downstairs in Mr. Saunderson's study; but, withal, he was helpless.

He looked out from the rose-entwined casement, across the shrubbery, to where the moonlight glittered among the trees. Those were the orchid houses. With his back to the bed, Dr. Cairn stood for long, thoughtfully watching the distant gleams of reflected light.

Craig Fenton and Sir Elwin Groves, with whom he had been consulting, had just gone. The nature of Myra Duquesne's illness had utterly puzzled them, and they had left, mystified.

Downstairs, Robert Cairn was pacing the study, wondering if his reason would survive this final blow which threatened. He knew, and his father knew, that a sinister something underlay this strange illness—an illness which had commenced on the day when Antony Ferrara had last visited the house.

The evening was insufferably hot. Not a breeze stirred in the leaves; and, despite open windows, the air of the room was heavy and lifeless. A faint perfume, having a sort of sweetness, but yet unutterably revolting, made itself perceptible to the nostrils. Apparently it had pervaded the house by slow degrees. The occupants were so used to it that they did not notice it at all.

Dr. Cairn had busied himself that evening in the sick room, burning some pungent preparation, to the amazement of the nurse and of the consultants. Now the biting fumes of his pastilles had all been wafted out of the window, and the faint, sweet smell was as noticeable as ever.

Not a sound broke the silence of the house. When the nurse quietly opened the door and entered, Dr. Cairn was still standing at the window, staring thoughtfully in the direction of the orchid houses. He turned, and, walking back to the bedside, bent over the patient.

Her face was like a white mask, and she was quite unconscious. So far as he could see, she showed no change either for better or worse; but her pulse was slightly more feeble. The doctor suppressed a groan of despair, for this mysterious progressive weakness could only have one end. All his experience told him that unless something could be done—and every expedient thus far attempted had proved futile—Myra Duquesne would die about dawn.

He turned on his heel and strode from the room, whispering a few words of instruction to the nurse. Descending the stairs, he passed the closed study door, not daring to think of his son who waited within, and entered the dining room.

A single lamp burned there, and the gaunt figure of Mr. Saunderson was outlined dimly where he sat in the window seat. Crombie, the gardener, stood by the table.

"Now, Crombie," said Dr. Cairn quietly, closing the door behind him, "what is this story about the orchid houses, and why did you not mention it before?"

The man stared persistently into the shadows of the room, avoiding Dr. Cairn's glance.

"Since he has had the courage to own up," interrupted Mr. Saunderson, "I have overlooked the matter. He was afraid to speak before, because he had no business to be in the orchid houses." His Scotsman's voice grew suddenly fierce. "He knows it well enough!"

"I know, sir, that you don't want me to interfere with the orchids," replied the man; "but I only ventured in because I thought I saw a light moving there."

"Rubbish!" snapped Mr. Saunderson.

"Pardon me, Saunderson," said Dr. Cairn; "but a matter of more importance than the welfare of all the orchids in the world is under consideration now."

Saunderson coughed dryly.

"You are right, Cairn," he said. "I shouldn't have lost my temper for such a trifle, at a time like this. Tell your own tale, Crombie. I won't interrupt."

"It was last night, then," continued the man. "I was standing at the door of my cottage, smoking a pipe before turning in, when I saw a faint light moving over by the orchid houses."

"Reflection of the moon, no doubt," muttered Saunderson. "I am sorry. Go on, Crombie!"

"I knew that some of the orchids were very valuable, and I thought there would not be time to call you. Also I did not want to worry you, knowing you had worry enough already, so I knocked out my pipe, put it in my pocket, and went through the shrubbery. I saw the light again. It seemed to move from the first house into the second. I couldn't see what it was."

"Was it like a candle, or a pocket lamp?" jerked Dr. Cairn.

"Nothing like that, sir; a softer light, more like a glowworm, but much brighter. I went around and tried the door, and it was locked. Then I remembered the door at the other end, and I cut around by the path between the houses and the wall, so that I had no chance to see the light again, until I got to the other door. I found this unlocked. There was a close kind of smell in there, sir, and the air was very hot."

"Naturally, it was hot," interrupted Saunderson.

"I mean much hotter than it should have been. It was like an oven, and the smell was stifling."

"What smell?" asked Dr. Cairn. "Can you describe it?"

"Excuse me, sir, but I seem to notice it here in this room to-night. I think I noticed it about the place before, but never so strong as in the orchid houses."

"Go on!" said Dr. Cairn.

"I went through the first house, and saw nothing. The shadow of the wall prevented the moonlight from shining in there; but just as I was about to enter the middle house, I thought I saw—a face."

"What do you mean by saying that you thought you saw a face?" snapped Mr. Saunderson.

"I mean, sir, that it was so horrible and so strange that I could not believe it was real—which is one of the reasons why I did not speak before. It reminded me of the face of a gentleman I have seen here—Mr. Ferrara."

Dr. Cairn stifled an exclamation.

"But in other ways it was quite unlike the gentleman. In some ways it was more like the face of a woman—a very bad woman. It had a sort of bluish light on it, but where any light could have come from I don't know. It seemed to be smiling, and two bright eyes looked straight out at me."

Crombie stopped, raising his hand to his head confusedly.

"I could see nothing but just this face—low down, as if the person it belonged to was crouching on the floor. There was a tall plant of some kind just beside it."

"Well," said Dr. Cairn, "go on! What did you do?"

"I turned to run," confessed the man. "If you had seen that horrible face, you would understand how frightened I was. Then, when I got to the door, I looked back."

"I hope you had closed the door behind you," snapped Saunderson.

"Never mind that, never mind that!" interrupted Dr. Cairn.

"I had closed the door behind me—yes, sir; but just as I was going to open it again, I took a quick glance back, and the face had gone. I came out, and I was walking over the lawn, wondering whether I should tell you, when it occurred to me that I hadn't noticed whether the key had been left in or not."

"Did you go back to see?" asked Dr. Cairn.

"I didn't want to," admitted Crombie, "but I did, and—"

"Well?"

"The door was locked, sir."

"So you concluded that your imagination had been playing you tricks!" said Saunderson grimly. "In my opinion you were right."

Dr. Cairn dropped into an armchair.

"All right, Crombie; that will do."

Crombie, with a mumbled "Good night, gentlemen," turned and left the room.

"Why are you worrying about such a thing as this," inquired Saunderson, when the door had closed, "at a time like the present?"

"Never mind," replied Dr. Cairn wearily. "I must return to Half Moon Street now, but I shall be back within an hour."

With no other word to Saunderson, he stood up and walked out to the hall. He rapped at the study door, and it was instantly opened by Robert Cairn. No spoken word was necessary; the burning question could be read in the young man's burning eyes. Dr. Cairn laid his hand upon his son's shoulder.

"I won't excite false hopes, Rob," he said huskily. "I am going back to the house, and I want you to come with me."

Robert Cairn turned his head aside, groaning aloud; but his father grasped him by the arm, and together they left that house of shadows, entered the car which waited at the gate, and, without exchanging a word *en route,* came to Half Moon Street.

Dr. Cairn led the way into the library, switching on the reading lamp upon the large table. His son stood just within the doorway, his arms folded and his chin upon his breast. The doctor sat down at the table, watching the other.

Suddenly Robert spoke.

"Is it possible, sir, is it possible"—his voice was barely audible—"that her illness can in any way be due to the orchids?"

Dr. Cairn frowned thoughtfully.

"What do you mean, exactly?" he asked.

"Orchids are mysterious things. They come from places where there are strange and dreadful diseases. Is it not possible that they may convey—"

"Some sort of contagion?" concluded Dr. Cairn. "It is a point that I have seen raised, certainly; but nothing of the sort has ever been established. I have heard something, to-night, though, which—"

"What have you heard, sir?" asked his son eagerly, stepping forward to the table.

"Never mind at the moment, Rob. Let me think."

He rested his elbow upon the table and his chin in his hand. His professional instincts had told him that unless something could be done—something which the highest medical skill in London had thus far been unable to devise — Myra Duquesne had only four or five hours to live.

Somewhere in his mind a memory lurked, evasive, taunting him. This wild suggestion of his son's, that the girl's illness might be due in some way to her contact with the orchids, was in part responsible for his confused recollection; but it seemed to be associated, too, with the story of Crombie, the gardener, and with Antony Ferrara. He felt that somewhere in the darkness surrounding him there was a speck of light, if he could but turn in the right direction to see it.

So, while Robert Cairn walked restlessly about the big room, the doctor sat with his chin resting in the palm of his hand, seeking to concentrate his mind upon that vague memory, which defied him. The hand of the library clock crept from twelve toward one, and he knew that the faint life in Myra Duquesne was slowly ebbing away in response to some mysterious condition, utterly outside his experience.

Distant clocks struck a single stroke—one o'clock!

Robert Cairn began to beat his fist into the palm of his left hand convulsively. His father did not stir, but sat there, a black-shadowed wrinkle between his brows.

"By God!"

The doctor sprang to his feet, and with feverish haste began to fumble among a bunch of keys.

"What is it, sir? What is it?"

The doctor unlocked the drawer of the big table, and drew out a thick manuscript written in small and exquisitely neat characters. He placed it under the lamp, and rapidly began to turn the pages.

"It is hope, Rob!" he said, with quiet self-possession.

Robert Cairn came around the table and leaned over his father's shoulder.

"Sir Michael Ferrara's writing!"

"His unpublished book, Rob. We were to have completed it together, but death claimed him, and, in view of the contents, I—perhaps superstitiously—decided to suppress it. Ah!"

He placed the point of his finger upon a carefully drawn sketch, designed to illustrate the text. It was evidently a careful copy from an ancient Egyptian original. It represented a row of priestesses, each having her hair plaited in a thick cue, standing before a priest armed with a pair of scissors. In the center of the drawing was an altar, upon which stood vases of flowers; and upon the right ranked a row of mummies, corresponding in number with the priestesses upon the left.

"By God!" repeated Dr. Cairn. "We were both wrong, we were both wrong!"

"What do you mean, sir? For Heaven's sake, what do you mean?"

"This drawing," replied Dr. Cairn, "was copied from the wall of a certain tomb, now reclosed. Since we knew that the tomb was that of one of the greatest wizards who ever lived in Egypt, we also knew that the inscription had some magical significance. We knew that the flowers represented here were a species of the extinct sacred lotus. All our researches did not avail us to discover for what purpose, or by what means, these flowers were cultivated. Nor could we determine the meaning of the cutting off"—he ran his fingers over the sketch—"of the priestesses' hair by the high priest of the goddess."

"What goddess, sir?"

"A goddess, Rob, of whom Egyptology knows nothing. Hers, apparently, was a mystical religion, the existence of which has been vaguely suspected by a living French savant; but this is no time—"

Dr. Cairn closed the manuscript, replaced it, and relocked the drawer. He glanced at the clock.

"A quarter past one," he said. "Come, Rob!"

Without hesitation, his son followed him from the house. The car was waiting, and shortly they were speeding through the deserted streets back to the house where death in a strange guise was beckoning to Myra Duquesne.

"Do you know," asked Dr. Cairn, "if Saunderson has bought any orchids—quite recently, I mean?"

"Yes," replied his son dully. "He bought a small parcel only a fortnight ago."

"A fortnight!" cried Dr. Cairn excitedly. "You are quite sure of that? You mean that the purchase was made since Ferrara—"

"Ceased to visit the house? Yes. Why, it must have been the very day after!"

Dr. Cairn was evidently laboring under tremendous excitement.

"Where did he buy these orchids?" he asked evenly.

"From some one who came to the house—some one with whom he had never dealt before."

The doctor, his hands resting upon his knees, was rapidly drumming with his finger tips.

"And did he cultivate them?"

"Two only proved successful. One is on the point of blooming—if it is not blooming already. He calls it the Mystery."

At that, the doctor's excitement overcame him. Suddenly leaning out of the window, he shouted to the chauffeur:

"Quicker! Quicker! Never mind risks! Keep on top speed!"

"What is it, sir?" cried his son. "Heavens, what is it?"

"Did you say that it might have bloomed, Rob?"

"Myra"—Robert Cairn swallowed noisily—"told me three days ago that it was expected to bloom before the end of the week."

"What is it like?"

"A thing four feet high, with huge egg-shaped buds."

"Merciful God grant that we are in time!" whispered Dr. Cairn. "I could believe once more in the justice of Heaven, if the great knowledge of Sir Michael Ferrara should prove to be the weapon to destroy the fiend whom we raised—he and I—may we be forgiven!"

Robert Cairn's excitement was dreadful.

"Can you tell me nothing?" he cried. "What do you hope? What do you fear?"

"Don't ask me, Rob," replied his father. "You will know within five minutes."

The car was leaping along the dark suburban roads at a speed little below that of an express train. Corners the chauffeur negotiated in racing fashion, so that at times two wheels thrashed the empty air. Once or twice the big car swung around as upon a pivot, only to recover again in response to the skilled tactics of the driver.

They roared down the sloping, narrow lane to the gate of Mr. Saunderson's house with a noise like the coming of a great storm, and they were nearly hurled from their seats when the brakes were applied and the car was brought to a standstill.

Dr. Cairn leaped out, pushed open the gate, and ran up to the house, his son closely following. There was a light in the hall, and Miss Saunderson, who had expected them, and had heard their stormy approach, already held the door open.

"Wait here one moment," said Dr. Cairn, in the hall.

Ignoring Saunderson, who had come out from the library, he ran upstairs. A minute later, his face very pale, he came running down again.

"Is she worse?" began Saunderson. "But—"

"Give me the key of the orchid house!" said Dr. Cairn peremptorily.

"Orchid house!"

"Don't hesitate. Don't waste a second. Give me the key!"

Saunderson's expression showed that he thought Dr. Cairn to be mad, but nevertheless he plunged his hand into his pocket and pulled out a key ring. Dr. Cairn snatched it in a flash.

"Which key?" he snapped.

"The Chubb, but—"

"Follow me, Rob!"

Down the hall raced the physician, his son beside him, and Mr. Saunderson followed more slowly. Out into the garden he went and swiftly over the lawn toward the shrubbery.

The orchid houses lay in dense shadow, but the doctor almost threw himself against the door.

"Strike a match!" he panted. "Never mind—I have it!"

The door flew open with a bang. A sickly perfume swept out to them.

"Matches! Matches, Rob! This way!"

They went stumbling in. Robert Cairn took out a box of matches, and struck one. His father was farther along, in the center building.

"Your knife, boy—quick, quick!"

As the dim light crept along the aisle between the orchids, Robert Cairn saw his father's horror-stricken face, and saw a strange green plant growing in a sort of tub, before which the doctor stood. Four huge, smooth, egg-shaped buds grew upon the leafless stems. Two of them were on the point of opening, and one already showed a vivid rosy flush about its apex.

Dr. Cairn grasped the knife which Robert tremblingly offered him. The match went out. There followed a sound of hacking, a soft swishing, and a dull thud upon the tiled floor.

As another match fluttered into brief life, the mysterious orchid, severed just above the soil, fell from the tub. Dr. Cairn stamped the swelling buds under his feet. A profusion of colorless sap was pouring out upon the floor.

Above the intoxicating odor of the place, a smell like that of blood made itself perceptible.

The second match went out.

"Another!"

Dr. Cairn's voice barely rose above a whisper. With fingers quivering, Robert Cairn managed to light a third match. His father tore out a smaller plant from a second tub, and ground its soft tentacles beneath his feet. The place smelled like an operating theater.

As the third match went out, the doctor swayed dizzily, clutching at his son for support.

"Her life was in it, boy!" he whispered. "She would have died in the hour that it bloomed! The priestesses were consecrated to this. Let me get into the air!"

Mr. Saunderson, silent with amazement, met them.

"Don't speak," said Dr. Cairn to him. "Look at the dead stems of your Mystery. You will find a thread of bright hair in the heart of each!"

Dr. Cairn opened the door of the sick room and beckoned to his son, who, haggard, trembling, waited upon the landing.

"Come in, boy," he said softly, "and thank God!"

Robert Cairn, on tiptoe, entered. Myra Duquesne, pathetically pale but with that ominous shadow gone from her face, turned her wistful eyes toward the door; and their wistfulness became gladness.

"Rob!" she sighed—and stretched out her arms.

(*This series will be concluded in the November number of* MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE)

LOVE'S PROSE

I KNOW it is the poet's way,
But, though my honest speech undo me,
Lovelier than stars, and dawns, and flowers,
My dear, you're all a woman to me!

So I'll not vow your eyes are stars,
Nor that your lovely cheeks are roses,
Nor call your blush a summer dawn;
Sweeter than any song love's prose is.

I've sworn I'll never say to you
Your teeth are pearls, your lips are rubies;
Let other poets, if they will,
Repeat such things, like witless boobies!

Yes, I refuse for similes
To ransack all earth, air, and ocean;
You're not a fawn, nor a gazelle,
Nor swan that goes with slow, grave motion.

I'll take you, dear, life's highest worth,
A woman needing no apology—
You're not a gaudy jewel shop,
You're no compendium of zoölogy;

No hamadryad on a lawn,
No nymph that lurks in ancient story;
A woman—that's enough for me;
I can conceive no further glory!

Harry Kemp

Money to Burn

WHY GRANDPA WINCH INSISTED ON LIGHTING HIS STOGIES WITH TEN-DOLLAR BILLS

By Ellis Parker Butler

A DETECTIVE off duty can be as human as any other man, and take his pleasures the same way, as far as I've been able to notice; and if I like a little game of poker, with the stakes not too high for my spare change, that's nobody's business but my own.

Some of the folks around and about Westcote kicked a lot about this Wahtawah Club of ours, one time and another. They said it was a gambling den, and ought to be shut up, but there was nothing to all that. The law is mighty clear on that subject. Nobody ran any game for profit at the Wahtawah Club, so it was not gambling.

The only trouble was that the club had those rooms over the post office, third floor, and to some it looked bad to see the blinds pulled down and the place lighted up two or three o'clock in the morning, when everything except the All Night Lunch was dark and deserted. But all there was to it was that a bunch of us used to go up there, Friday nights especially, and play cards awhile and maybe drink a little beer and eat some sandwiches and drink some hot coffee that Mike sent up from the All Night Lunch.

Taking it one way and another, if you can stand for poker and a few bottles of beer, the Wahtawah Club was as decent a little joint as a man ever saw. I never knew a man to lose more than ten or twelve dollars there. I never knew a man to get drunk or noisy, and I never knew any of the fellows to cut loose and do anything rash or raw, except this old pink-cheeked grandpa named Franz Joseph Winch.

That was sort of funny, too, because Winch, to look at him, wasn't the sort of man that would burn a copper cent, let alone a five-dollar bill; but burning five-dollar bills was his high suit.

Up in this Wahtawah Club you didn't find any of those marble statues and velvet curtains and deep-pile carpets that you find in a genuine gambling joint. There wasn't anything on the floor but cigar ashes and stubs, and not a thing on the walls but the plaster the builder put there. The shades over the three windows cost thirty-five cents apiece. I know, because I bought them myself.

There were eight card tables, an old secondhand pine kitchen table, and a pine box we used to chuck the decks of cards in until the next time. The chips we generally left on the table. After we had been going a year or so, we spread ourselves and bought eight tin cuspidors at twenty cents apiece; and that was about the size of the Wahtawah Club.

A mighty good all-around lot of fellows we were, too. It was "Hello, Bill!" and "Hello, Jim!" and "How's the old scout feeling to-night?" and pull up the chairs and start in. The beer stood at the back of the big table, in bottles, with the glasses in front, and a beer-opener handy; and when one of us wanted a drink, he got up and got it. This was before prohibition, and nobody thought much of a glass of light beer in that crowd. It didn't mean any more to them than water, and it wasn't really much stronger.

The big hanging lamps went with the room. The owner was always talking about putting in electrics, but he never got around to it, and we never cared much. After we had been in the room half an hour, you had to sort of grope for your cards through the tobacco smoke, anyway.

We were all sorts of fellows. We had an alderman, and six or eight business men, and two doctors, and all sorts—just good fellows, if you know what I mean.

One night the alderman brought this old pink-cheeked grandpa, Franz Joseph Winch, up to the rooms, and gave us all a knockdown to him. Seems that Percy—the alderman's name was John, but we all called him Percy, because he wore one of these cutaway coats, with a vest with a white linen business pinned inside the front of it—Percy had a house, and had rented it to this old Franz Joseph Winch. He got acquainted with him that way, and thought he was a fine old boy. Grandpa—we called him that right from the start—had a wife and two grown daughters who lived with him, and I don't know how many who didn't—maybe some, and maybe not any. The old lady was a fine old dame, and the girls were nice, too. In fact, they were just a nice, respectable family, but well fixed—plenty of money.

It seemed, from what Percy told us, that Franz Joseph Winch had lived in Westcote when he was a young fellow, and had clerked and done one thing and another around town until he was about thirty. Then he went West for all of thirty years more, and made his good money. Now he was back, and past sixty years of age, with nothing to do but take things easy and enjoy life the best he knew how.

Out where he came from, he had always sat in at a poker game at the Commercial Club, and he had got so it was bread and meat to him. It was by asking Percy if there was any Commercial Club in Westcote where he could riffle a deck now and again, that he heard of our little Wahtawah Club.

That was all right. One or two more or less made no difference to us, as long as they were the right sort, and we gave grandpa the glad hand.

That first night, if I remember right, grandpa lost something like eighty-five cents, and he entered it in a little notebook he kept in his pocket. He always entered what he won or lost in that little notebook, but that did not amuse us much. Several of us did the same thing. It was a sort of game to figure up whether a year's playing brought us out ahead of the game or loser.

The thing that did give us a jolt was what grandpa did one night after he had been spending his evenings at the Wahtawah Club for about two weeks. It was along about two in the morning, and we had cashed in and squared up, and were ready to sit back and have a last glass of beer and talk over how the hands had run, when, all at once, grandpa finished figuring up his winnings up to then. He took out a stogy—he always smoked stogies—bit off the end, reached into his pocket, and took out a five-dollar bill.

"Well, boys," he said, "I'm a winner. I've got money to burn. Here goes!"

With that the old fellow folded the five-dollar bill four or five times lengthwise, making a sort of spill of it. Then he reached up to the top of the lamp chimney and held the end of the bill over the flame until it was afire. He held the bill until it was almost burned down to his fingers. Then he lighted his stogy with it, and finally dropped the burning stub into the cuspidor.

"My gosh! What did you do that for?" one of the fellows asked. "That was good money!"

"Money to burn!" grandpa said, and swelled out his chest. "Money to burn, boys!"

II

Well, we let it go at that. We chaffed the old boy a good deal, and thought he had perhaps had too much beer. Getting a little too much warmed up that way sets some folks bragging, and burning money seemed to be a sort of brag; but it was mighty funny, at that, because you would never have looked to old grandpa to do a thing like that—never!

You've got to get this old fellow into your mind. Make him about five feet two inches high. If you say an average man is five feet eight, and then take six inches off him, you'll see that grandpa ran below the middling quite considerable. Then think of him as thin—thin and delicate, and dressed in neat black clothes, like a deacon or something. Then get his face thin, with about the last pair of white mutton-chop whiskers left on earth, and nose glasses with gold rims and a little black cord coming down and around his neck. Pink face—gentle blue eyes—take him all in all, and you'd say grandpa was a real nice little old lady.

And then imagine him standing up and patting his chest and sticking a five-dollar bill in the lamp and saying:

"Money to burn, boys!"

You couldn't quite get him, could you? Well, neither could I—unless he had had too much beer.

I've heard of a man who was always meek and gentle and subdued, who came home from his only banquet of the year, where some one had served champagne. When he reached the front door, he tried to steady himself, swaying back and forth from his toes to his heels, and said to his wife:

" Wife! Listen, wife! The only trouble with you, wife, is that I've always been too good to you!"

And then he went into the house and went to bed, and for another twenty-five years he was meek and gentle and subdued. His one outburst in fifty years! I thought maybe it was something like that with grandpa; but that was where I was good and fooled.

Less than a week later, the nice old boy broke loose again. Same place, and pretty close to the same time of morning—same general layout—grandpa looking at his memorandum book and counting up his wins and losses. Then out comes the stogy, he bites the end off, and out of his pocket comes a nice crisp five-dollar bill.

" Well, boys, I'm a winner again," he said. " I've got money to burn once more. Here goes!"

And the old codger folded up that nice, crisp, useful five-dollar bill and held it over the lamp chimney until it was well ablaze. Then he leisurely lighted his stogy with it, and threw the burning remainder into the cuspidor.

That night I happened to walk home with grandpa and Percy, and when we had left the old boy at his door I walked on with the alderman.

" What do you think of grandpa and his conflagration of five-dollar bills, Percy?" I asked. " Ain't he the gay young kid? Ain't he the cut-up?"

" Beats me," Percy admitted. " He looks such a staid old party. I don't know that I can make head or tail of it myself. Maybe it's a custom he learned out West there—one of the wild West yee-ow stunts. Shouldn't wonder if that was it. I can see the gentle old lad out there, not stacking up one, two, three with those noisy boys where the sky is the limit, and all the time wishing he dared break loose and behave as those red-blooded men do, where the sky is a little bluer and men are men, and all that sort of thing. Can't you imagine him out there, afraid to utter a faint peep in that land of rattlesnakes and two-gun men? And then, when he gets back here among us effete Cholly boys, just thinking he can be the very devil and all? The way some of those farmer lads from Iowa, that come East to write stories, buy a Stetson with a rim half a mile wide at the first hat store they strike south of the Bronx."

" Maybe so," I said. " Do you think it is real money? I can't say I got a good look at it myself. Might be stage money, mightn't it?"

" Well, yes, it might," Percy agreed. " I never thought of that."

" I'll try to get a better look at it, if he does it again," I said. " Looks rainy, huh? Well, so long!"

And old grandpa did it again, too. Maybe it was a week later, and maybe two weeks, when out comes his memo book, and out comes the stogy, and out comes the five-dollar bill.

" Well, boys, I'm a winner again," he says. " I've got money to burn. Here goes!"

And *that* five-dollar bill goes up in smoke!

I had been sitting next to the old lad right along, meaning to get a good look at his money the next time, if I could, and I did get enough of a look at it to know it was none of your stage money. It had all the look of real money, as far as I could see. Anyway, it was none of this phony stage stuff with green print on one side and " Use Blahblah's Stomach Bitters " on the other.

" I wonder," I said to Percy, when we were walking home that night, " if the old lad has been buying green goods! It might be that," I said. " He might have run across one of these green goods men and bought a ream or two of counterfeit bills, some time or other; and maybe now he is having his little bit of fun burning them up. Have you noticed he always takes them out of his pocket?"

" That's so," Percy admitted. " Maybe that's it. We'll just keep a better lookout on him, and see whether that's so or not."

III

So, you can see, grandpa and his money to burn got to be a sort of interesting little subject with Percy and me. It did not amount to much, but it was something to be amused over and to try to figure out. It gave us something to talk about besides politics, and the weather, and how odd it was that I hadn't anything much bigger than a jack in my hand all evening.

By and by, one night, out comes grandpa's memorandum book, the same as usual. I was banking that night, and grandpa won a dollar and thirty cents.

"You get a dollar thirty, grandpa," I said. "Got change for a five?"

"I certainly have," he said.

He dug into his pocket and brought out three one-dollar bills and seventy cents in silver, and put them on the table. I shoved a five-dollar bill at him. Grandpa picked it up and gave it a glance.

"Well, boys," he says, "I'm a winner again. I've got money to burn. Here goes!"

He didn't do any sleight of hand business, either—not, at least, that I could notice. He folded that bill into a spill and held it over the lamp until it was ablaze, and then he lighted his stogy and threw the burning remainder of the bill into the cuspidor.

I looked at Percy and nodded, to tell him it was a genuine five-dollar bill. Percy nodded that he had seen it, too, and that it was indeed so.

One of the fellows—Henry, I think it was—spoke up.

"My eye, grandpa!" he said. "You oughtn't to burn up good money that way. It's all well enough once in a way, but you oughtn't to keep it up. It's waste—sinful waste."

"You watch my smoke," grandpa said, grinning. "I've got money to burn, I tell you!"

One of our fellows was a trustee of the hospital in our town. He spoke up next.

"It *is* a waste," he said, quite serious about it. "If you've got so much money to burn, why don't you give it to the hospital? We need it the worst way. This year our deficit is going to be—"

We never did hear what the deficit was going to be.

"Never you mind, son—never you mind!" grandpa said. "I've got money. I'll look out for your hospital, up to my limits, when the time comes. This is my burning money. Nobody can tell me what to do with my money. I burn it, or I don't burn it. Here goes!"

And what did the old codger do? He felt in his pants pocket, dug out a small roll of bills, chose a nice, clean new one, folded it up, stuck it in the lamp flame, and burned it. He didn't light a stogy with it. He just naturally held it in his fingers and watched it burn to nothing — a perfectly good five-dollar bill!

"And I've got a couple more here, boys," he said, running his finger along the edge of the roll. "Any more objections? If so, I'll burn another."

Nobody offered any objections. We just naturally hated to see good money burned that way, and if anybody had let out a peep the old fellow would certainly have burned another—maybe two or three. We all had a feeling that it wasn't right for us to egg him on to any such foolishness.

It was his weak spot, that money burning idea, it seemed to us. It was what he was childish about — that's what we thought. If we fussed too much about it, he might get stubborn and burn a whole wad of his money, just to show that he was its boss, and that he was his own boss, and that he could do what he pleased with it.

"All right, grandpa—all right!" I said. "Have it your own way. We all waste a little of the long green in our own ways, I guess, and we have no kick coming."

So he put his roll back into his pocket.

I talked the matter over with Percy that night, as we walked home together.

"I hate to say so, Percy, about such a nice old boy," I said; "but it does look to me as if grandpa was a little off in the upper story. About that money burning thing he's so fond of—what do you think?"

"Well," he said, "it don't look exactly rational, does it?"

"It looks plumb crazy to me," I said. "I'm going to speak to him about it, and see if I can make sure he is crazy, or make sure he is not crazy."

"Go at him easy, then," Percy said. "He's a nice old fellow, and, if you come right down to it, I don't know that it's any of our business. He has a lot of money, or so I guess."

"How do you know he has?" I asked. "Did he show it to you?"

"No," Percy said; "but he says he has."

Well, I did two things. For one, I went to the bank—the Westcote National Bank, the only one we have in Westcote—and got a private interview with the cashier. I admit I used my badge on him, just to make him open up a little, if I could, for the cashier is a tight-mouthed old fish if ever there was one. I asked him how Franz Joseph stood.

"We can't give out any information about our customers," he told me.

"Then he is a customer here?" I said.

"Yes, I can say that much—he is a customer here, and a depositor, and one of the best depositors we have. He carries an entirely satisfactory balance."

"Well, just as man to man, and not talking bank at all," I said, "do you think the old boy is worth a million dollars?"

"No," he said; "but he is worth every cent of half of it."

"A couple of five-dollar bills would not mean much to him, then?" I said.

"He could afford to lose a few without suffering great privation, I imagine," the cashier said with a rather sour smile; "but if you mean it would not hurt his feelings to lose a few five-dollar bills, I am not so sure. Mr. Winch is not reckless with his money. As a matter of fact, speaking in the utmost confidence, and as man to man, I think he is the tightest wad in Westcote. A month ago we made an error in our favor of twelve cents in figuring interest on his account, and he raised 'Hail Columbia.' Yes, I can say that Franz Joseph Winch only cares a little more for a penny than you care for your right leg. As a matter of fact," said the cashier, "I wouldn't care if he took his account out of the bank. He is the closest, penny-paringest old rascal I ever had dealings with. He cares more for a dime than I care for a hundred dollars, and I'm not reckless with money."

"I'll say you're not!" I said.

"And it angers me doubly," the cashier said, "because he knows well enough a bank has to make a living, the same as anybody or anything else has to. He once worked in a bank. He worked in this very bank, and now he acts as if a bank could live on air. He—well, I can't give away the bank's secrets, but he demands one per cent more interest on his balance than we ever gave any one before."

"He must have a lot of money here, then?" I said.

"I said his account was satisfactory," the cashier replied.

That was all I could get out of him; so I went and had my talk with grandpa.

I went at him gently. I began by talking about the four kings he had held last Friday night. I went on to talk about the Wahtawah Club, and veered around to his burning five-dollar bills.

Right there he stopped me. He wouldn't hear a word from me about that. He got red in the face, and his blue eyes snapped.

"Once and for all," he said, "I will not be bullyragged about that! No, sir! It's my money, and I'll do as I please with it. If you, or any of you, bother me about it again, I'll bring a whole sheaf of five-dollar bills down there and burn the whole lot in the cuspidor, as sure as my name is Franz Joseph Winch! Let that suffice! No more of it! Will you have one of my stogies? No? I don't blame you. They're vile, but they're cheap."

And the next week he burned another five-dollar bill.

IV

THAT night, going home with Percy, I talked the whole thing over. I told him all I knew about it, and how the cashier of the Westcote National had said grandpa was naturally close with money.

"It looks bad to me," I said. "It looks to me as if he had that one screw loose in his headworks. I wonder if there would be any way of getting a talk with his folks—you know, just a little confidential talk with his wife, or one of the girls?"

Percy thought awhile.

"Do you think you ought to?" he asked then.

"Well, if a man is crazy—" I said. "Look at the tight-fisted old coot he is, hugging a nickel until the buffalo bellows, and playing his cards so close to his chest they fall inside his vest when he drops them; and then look at him burning up good five-dollar bills! It looks crazy to me. He might get a notion to burn his house down, or something. If I was his wife, I'd like to know about it."

"I think I can fix it to have her see you," said Percy, and he did.

Grandpa's wife was a nice old lady—lovely! They had fixed the house up in fine style, refined and everything, and she had me in the parlor. I felt pretty much hands and feet—like a railroad spike in a jeweler's tray of diamond lace pins.

She listened to me until I was through, and I was pretty sure she got what I was driving at. Then she held one of her hands in the other and looked at me.

"It is kindness of heart that brings you to tell me this, dear boy," she said. "My old heart thanks you for it, you may be sure; but what Franz does is right, as far as I am concerned. He has been a good, kind husband to me these many, many years, and everything we have has come to us through his efforts. I don't think a wife should interfere with her husband's simple pleasures. If my dear Franz finds pleasure in a game of cards with his friends one night a week, I am glad it is so."

"I know, ma'am," I said; "but it's not the card games I am thinking of—it's the money."

"He would not lose more than he could afford to lose," she said gently.

"What he loses is none of my business," I said. "I'm talking about the five-dollar bills he burns up."

"And that is none of our business, either, is it, good friend?" she said, not mean, but as sweet and gentle as possible. "That is for Franz to do as he pleases, is it not?"

"You don't think it shows he is—well, ma'am, a little touched, maybe, on that subject?"

"Ah, a man must have his amusements!" she said.

That was all she would say—what Franz did was right. Well, she was one fine old lady. I'm in love with her yet.

I told Percy the outcome of that little interview. He listened, and didn't have anything much to say to it. He said he guessed the old lady was about right, and made some general remarks that the world wouldn't be so much the worse if there were more like her.

That was all very well, too, but old grandpa and his five-dollar bills had got on my mind, and they worried me. I'm a detective, as I said before. Some folks think one way and some another, but I've always said that detectives who amount to a hang have a detective sense—if that is what you would call it. I mean they can smell a rat if there is a rat. They say, in their minds:

"There's something wrong there. I don't know what it is, but there's something wrong."

If you see a seaplane skittering along on the surface of the water, and, all of a sudden, it leaps into the air and skips over a yacht or a schooner, you don't think anything wrong. If some hard-going sport had burned five-dollar bills, I wouldn't have thought anything wrong. On the other hand, if you see a nice old family sailboat sailing over the surface of a bay, and, all of a sudden, that sailboat leaps out of the water like a flying fish and does a loop-the-loop, and then drops back and goes sailing along like a common sailboat again, only to hop up and do another loop in the air, you think something is mighty funny about that sailboat. If you've got any curiosity in your system, you want to know what's wrong with it.

"Look here!" I said to myself. "You're a detective, but you're a mighty poor one if you can't find out what's the matter with grandpa. Have a try!"

So I gave my mind to the job, just for the fun of the thing, and because grandpa was a nice old fellow. If he was going nuts or anything, I wanted to help him to steer away from it.

I said no more about his five-dollar bills, but I watched. I watched the old fellow burn five or six more, up there at the Wahtawah Club, and I watched with all the brains I had in my head. I watched close, like a cat watching a mouse; and by the time I had watched grandpa burn those five or six, and my head had registered every little thing my eyes could see, I added one and one together and I got two. Understand? I got a corner of something I could take a grip on.

All those five or six five-dollar bills that grandpa burned were notes of the Westcote National Bank!

So I watched for the next one he burned, and—sure enough—that was a Westcote National Bank note, too.

"That's a lead," I said to myself. "That means something. When the old boy takes out his roll and burns a strip of money, he always picks out a Westcote National Bank note. That ought to mean something. Is he so mad at that bank that he burns its money, or what?"

I didn't know enough about money to figure that out, so I went to the cashier of the Westcote National again.

"See here," I said to him. "If I had one of your bank notes, and it fell in the fire and burned up, could I get the money back?"

"No, sir!" he said. "Not unless, maybe, you gave a permanent bond to us for double the amount, or something like that, and took your oath that the money was burned up, and that you knew it was our note; and maybe not then."

"I'd lose it, then, would I? I'd be out that five dollars?"

"You certainly would."

"And how about your bank?"

"Our bank would be five dollars ahead," he said. "That note is our promise to pay five dollars. If that note is destroyed, or utterly lost, we don't have to pay that five dollars. We are five dollars ahead."

"That so? That's interesting, ain't it?" I said.

I thought that over, and thought through it. The next time I met grandpa on the street, I asked him to go up to the Wahtawah Club with me and hear something. It was afternoon, and we would have the club to ourselves.

"Now, grandpa," I said, when I had got him up there and had lighted a cigar, and he had set one of those stogies of his afire, "I want to talk to you like a Dutch uncle. I'm your friend, see? This is for your own good. You've been burning money, haven't you? Well, I just want to say that I've noticed you don't burn anything but Westcote National fives—see? And what I notice somebody else might—see? I'm all right, and I'll never utter a peep, but you never can tell what some other fellow may do. If I was you, I'd cut out burning money in public. Take a wad of it and burn it in your furnace, if you want to, but don't do it before folks. How much more have you got to burn?"

Well, the old boy got red in the face. He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a good roll of bills. Then he looked in his memorandum book and figured it up in his head, and he peeled off eight five-dollar bills from his roll. He held them out so I could see there were eight, and then he crumpled them up, put them in the cuspidor, and set a match to them.

I sat there and watched them burn—all eight of them Westcote National Bank notes, too.

"There!" he said, when they were ashes. "That's all. I've witnesses to every dollar. I feel better!"

"Well, that's all right, then," I said.

I was getting out of my chair, ready to go about my proper business, but he put his hand on my arm.

"Not crazy," he said. "Not touched up here," and he tapped his forehead with his finger. "Conscience money," he said, and looked me full in the face. "I worked in that bank once," he said. "I was a fool—I got away with two hundred dollars that belonged to them. It has worried me half a lifetime. Now I've paid it back, and I'm clean again. This," he said, "is just between you and me."

"Oh, sure!" I said.

"Will you have one of these stogies?" he asked, pulling one from his pocket.

"Go 'way!" I said, and I gave him a poke in the ribs. "I may be a friend, but I don't have to be a martyr!"

"I like 'em because they're cheap. No man ought to burn good money," the old boy declared.

BEFORE DUSK

The sunrise is an opal tower,
  The noon a golden tent;
But sunset is a rose-hung bower,
  Dim, redolent.

The sunrise has no secret stair
  To any still retreat;
The noon has never shadow where
  Shy souls may meet;

But sunset has a hidden place
  Of hushed and tender gloom,
Where growing buds of hope have space
  And dreams may bloom—

One dream as white as lilies are,
  That gleams as lilies do,
And one that blossoms like a star—
  Two dreams of you!

Nelle Richmond Eberhart

Decent Things

THE STORY OF AN INTERESTING SOCIAL EXPERIMENT

By Edgar Franklin

Author of "Regular People," "A Noise in Newboro," etc.

OLD Stephen Valmer believes that the salvation of modern civilization depends, not on the degenerate rich, but on the sturdy qualities of the lower classes. He therefore decides to use part of his wealth for the benefit of poor girls, who, with proper training, might become the mothers of a better generation. His lawyer, Penning, advises him to try out the idea, first, with one girl; and the opportunity is offered to May Allers, who works at the Mors Stamping Mill. May, an ambitious girl, jumps at the offer, and goes off to Boston with Mrs. Fairson, whom Valmer has engaged to train her.

Stephen Valmer's household consists of his two married daughters, Edith Dinsmore and Ina Fayles, and their husbands. A nephew, John Valmer, formerly lived with him, but John is a young man of strange ideas, and has decided to go off and earn his own living—which he is doing in the Mors Stamping Mill, under the assumed name of Jim Hammond.

The second installment opens when May Allers, with her training completed, and her Christian name improved to Mary, is brought to the Valmer home by Mrs. Fairson. Naturally, Stephen's daughters are greatly perturbed by the unexplained arrival of the girl.

VIII

QUAINTLY correct to the last, Mrs. Fairson had chaperoned Mary even into the Valmer library. Now, fully recompensed and adequately praised, the dignified lady was rolling down to the station in the Valmer car, on her way back to Boston—while Mr. Penning merely sat and stared numbly.

A rather cynical and skeptical person after his own harmless fashion, Penning just then was thunderstruck. The exquisitely beautiful young woman over there could not possibly be the May Allers they had interviewed in the den upstairs, on that startling evening three years ago!

That individual had been cheaply flashy as to garb; this one was—well, neither more nor less than perfect, from her demure little pumps to the distracting natural wave of her coiffure. That girl had been harsh of voice and brazen and suspicious of eye; this young woman spoke softly, giving one the impression of generations of culture behind her. Her eyes—why, they were the most beautiful eyes Penning ever had seen! They were clear and cool and fearless, and they were deep and very intelligent, too.

Mr. Penning's rather bewildered gaze settled upon Stephen Valmer, and he grunted. The poor old soul was fairly babbling his pleasure. As he examined Mary, just after her arrival, he had babbled at Mrs. Fairson. Now, much more moderately, he was babbling over Mary alone.

"Next, as to you yourself, my child," her benefactor was saying. "Are you thoroughly satisfied?"

"With all that you've done for me, do you mean, Mr. Valmer?"

"Let us say, rather, with the change that has been wrought."

Mary dimpled entrancingly.

"'Satisfied' doesn't express it, of course," she said. "I'm more grateful than I shall ever be able to tell you. It—oh, it has meant just everything to me! All that I ever wanted—and I know now that I wanted a great many things I didn't understand at all three years ago—you've given me, and—"

"Penning, is it marvelous?" Mr. Valmer demanded.

"It is," admitted the attorney.

"Is it incredible, Penning?"

"Very nearly that."

"But does it in every way justify my absurd little notion?"

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"Yes," Mr. Penning conceded.

"It does indeed, Penning," Stephen said dryly. "I wish now that I'd started with at least twelve of 'em, as I intended originally. I beg your pardon, my dear. You were saying?"

"I was trying to tell you how grateful I am," Mary laughed.

"Let's say no more about the gratitude. What comes next?"

"For me?"

"Exactly."

Mary's little smile grew earnest.

"I'm glad you asked that, because I do want your advice," she said. "I've been thinking about it this last year, of course, and I've tried to talk with Mrs. Fairson about it, but she's so—well, noncommittal, as a rule. She always seemed unwilling to advise anything at all, and she can turn off a subject in the nicest and gentlest way! I think I should make a good enough social secretary."

"Eh?"

"I'm sure that I should. If I can find a position that would leave me a little time, I thought I'd take a thorough course at one of the good schools, and then see if I couldn't find a place with some sort of future, in one of the big corporations."

"You're talking about going back to work?" Stephen rasped.

"To another sort of work, of course."

"Well, that's not at all what I've contemplated for you," Mr. Valmer said testily. "My endeavor, with you, has been to produce a very fine woman, Mary—not by any manner of means a very fine business woman."

"Can't they—er—go together?"

"Not in this case."

Mary smiled faintly.

"Well, I'm afraid they'll have to, in this case," she said; "if you're kind enough to consider me a very fine woman. I had a good many rough spots, and most of them have been smoothed away. I've loved it all more than you or any one else can ever understand, Mr. Valmer; but—one has to go on living!"

"Well?"

"And earning something to live on, of course," Mary said rather blankly.

"And live where, by the way?"

This time Mary's smile had vanished altogether.

"I've thought a good deal about that, too. At home, with my family, I suppose; or perhaps, if mother and dad don't mind too much, I might have a little place of my own, as soon as I'm able to afford it—just a room or two, and—"

"Exactly!" Valmer said briefly. "Two of 'em—one big, one little—upstairs."

"*Here?*"

"To be sure, my child! Your little nook is ready and waiting. Barton will show you there in a few moments. You will take your place here as a member of the family," Stephen pursued, with the utmost placidity. "My daughters will welcome you. Their friends will be your friends."

"But—"

"May we not consider that part as settled?" Mr. Valmer asked gently.

"Why, no, I—I'm afraid we may not," Mary said. "You mean for me—just to live here?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"Indefinitely, of course," Stephen said rather impatiently.

"Oh, but I couldn't possibly do that!"

"Why not?"

"Well, because—because it isn't done, I suppose," replied Mary. "I've accepted too much from you already, Mr. Valmer. I was greedy for all that I wanted so badly, and I—I suppose I didn't waste much thought on the ethics of the thing; but now it all seems so entirely different that I couldn't possibly turn into a mere parasite. You've done more for me than I can ever hope to repay, but—I must make my own way henceforth."

"You don't intend to leave this very instant?"

"I—I think so," said Mary.

"My dear child," Stephen Valmer said comfortably, "do you really wish to repay me!"

"If I could!"

"Then may I point out that to all intents you are still a laboratory specimen?"

Mary laughed softly.

"That was such a funny idea!"

"It was nothing of the kind!" Stephen said irritably. "It was a perfectly serious and earnest idea, with a great purpose behind it. Ask Penning! What you have been through in the past three years was merely preliminary. What I wish to do now is to keep you under my eye, Mary, and observe you, more or less casually, for an extended period."

"Well, that's the sweetest way of putting it, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart," said Mary; "but I think I must go, nevertheless, and—"

"Sweetest way be hanged! It's nothing of the kind! It's what I wish to do, young woman," Stephen rapped out. "You're at a point to which you have been brought by an expenditure of time and care and money. You yourself have gained something, of course, but through you and through me the whole race is destined to gain infinitely more—that is, of course, if you elect to remain."

"I—don't understand," Mary faltered.

"And I don't intend to fill you with a lot of idiotic self-consciousness by sitting here and expounding a dozen of my theories," Mr. Valmer snapped. "You're of age and your own mistress, Mary. If you choose to go, you will go; I can't detain you here against your will. You will simply have forced me to find another young woman and to begin all over again. If, on the other hand, you feel yourself indebted to me, you'll stay."

"And then?"

"Merely endeavor to forget that you were ever anything but a member of this particular circle, my child, and go on with the not necessarily difficult job of living. You're a very beautiful and charming girl. You will marry, and—"

"Oh!"

"Not immediately—eventually. Well?"

Mary's eyes were distinctly troubled. Round, frank, and searching, they studied her benefactor for many seconds, finally roving to Mr. Penning.

"Is this just Mr. Valmer's way of being kind?" she asked abruptly.

"Not in the sense that you mean," replied the attorney.

"But would it really be ungrateful of me to go?"

"Rankly so, my dear," Stephen said cheerfully, as Mr. Penning's lips opened. "Well?"

"Well, if that's actually so, of course—" began Mary, and the line between her eyes deepened.

"Oh—er—Barton!" Stephen called.

The butler paused in his passage past the partly open door, and entered.

"Miss Allers's trunks have arrived here, Barton?"

"They are in her room, sir."

Stephen Valmer popped out of his chair, beaming.

"Now, my child! If you'll just run up with Barton and make sure that everything is to your liking?" he said in conclusion.

When they had departed, his beam turned on Mr. Penning.

"Well?" he demanded triumphantly.

"She's very charming—very!"

"Drat her charm! I'm not concerned with her charm, except incidentally. Penning, three years ago that girl grabbed everything in sight without a quibble. Now she is very much disturbed about accepting a bare living. She has developed!"

"She has done all of that. Don't look at me like that, Mr. Valmer; I know what you mean, and I take it all back," said the attorney. "You're vindicated in every respect. You have done something extremely fine—something you'll always be able to look back upon with pleasure and real satisfaction and—"

"Done it? I haven't begun to do it!" Stephen grunted. "However, the main point is settled—it's beautifully feasible. Now let's get down to business in real earnest."

"Er—what business?"

"That of the Valmer Foundation, of course."

"The what?" said Mr. Penning.

"The Valmer Character Foundation—the thing I've mentioned."

"You've never mentioned that in my hearing!" the attorney gasped.

Stephen frowned and shrugged.

"Is that so, Penning? I fancied that I had. Doubtless I failed to mention it because I seek to distress you as rarely as may be," he said dryly. "Nevertheless, that's the name of it, and that's what it is to be. Not advertised, you understand. Not even incorporated, I think, although it may be a good scheme to incorporate later on. Don't look at *me* like that, Penning! I have no intention of rushing headlong into the affair. I plan to set aside only one million dollars for the beginning."

"One *mil*—" gurgled in Mr. Penning's throat.

"How much are you making a million dollars earn for me?"

The attorney recovered himself and smiled dizzily.

"One of them, sir, is bringing in very nearly eighty thousand dollars a year, and—"

"We'll take that one," Stephen decided. "Now, let's see. Quantities always cut costs, don't they? We can handle a batch of twelve girls on that income, Penning—possibly even one or two more. It has occurred to me, too, as very probable, that by the end of the first year we may be able to pick out the potential successes, and so eliminate whatever apparently hopeless cases may appear. In that way—oh, just sit back and stop your confounded fussing, Penning!" said Stephen, as he started for the door. "I've made a quantity of notes on this subject, and I'll run upstairs and get them while—ah, Ina! I didn't know you were at home. Hello, Edie! You here too?"

He paused and treated his daughters to his beaming smile. Ina and her sister, sauntering in with the most carefully casual effect, stared hard at him for one tiny, startled instant, and then sought to beam in return.

Smiles from Stephen Valmer were a trifle rare. Deep down, rather naturally, he was as fond of his daughters as any other father; but outwardly, these last few years, he had radiated disapproval — of their friends, of their habits of thought, of their manners, of their general lack of purpose.

The consequences had been logical enough. To Ina and her sister, their father had become a person to be handled with gloves. One never irritated him, if diplomacy and, lamentably, a total lack of frankness could avert that disaster.

So Ina merely smiled, with a winsome and childlike effect, as he said:

"I wish I'd known that you were about! You might have met—er—"

He paused, his eyes twinkling. Mrs. Fayles, for another tiny instant, studied the twinkle. She turned one shade paler.

"Oh, the — er — girl that Barton just took up to the blue room?" she hazarded.

"Ah! You saw her?"

"Just a glimpse."

"You found her a very charming and beautiful young woman, I trust?"

Mrs. Fayles, as did her sister, turned another shade paler. As one, they glanced swiftly at James T. Penning.

No marble statue ever owned eyes more blankly expressionless than those of Mr. Penning at that moment—in itself a bad sign. Abruptly, Ina forced her smile back to its post of duty.

"Why, so far as one could judge from a very brief glimpse—yes, of course," she said easily. "But—who is she, father?"

"She is the first, my dear, of a series of very interesting experiments," Mr. Valmer stated blandly.

"Of—of a what?"

"A series of experiments of the most absorbing character, although you would no doubt be rather bored than otherwise by a description of them just now."

"Oh, but I'm sure I shouldn't, father!" Mrs. Fayles said quickly.

"And I am equally sure that you would," Stephen returned firmly. "Permit me, please, to go on to what I really wish to say. Mary is now part of the household."

"*Mary!*" breathed Mrs. Dinsmore.

"Mary Allers—yes. Well?"

"What—what part of it is she?" Ina managed.

"Broadly, a member—or, it might perhaps be better to say, a permanent and highly esteemed guest."

It may have been the utterly complacent quality of his smile, and its astonishing breadth, that brought from Mrs. Dinsmore the sharp reply:

"Yes, but *who* is she, father? *Why* is she here? You can't very well reach out and produce a strange female, just like taking a rabbit out of a hat, and make her a member of your household, without—"

"Really? And pray why not?" Stephen interrupted.

"It's a trifle too original!"

"Bah!" said Mr. Valmer, thus disposing of that objection. "Mary is in no sense a strange female, as you put it. I have known her for some three years. She is here because I wish her to be here. Is that sufficient?"

"Decidedly not, father!" Mrs. Dinsmore responded hotly, for she owned most of the temper of the family. "After all, we do know a few people, and they're the right sort. A woman nobody ever saw or heard of can't simply be paraded before them without explanation. She has some status here. What is it?"

"That of a guest," Stephen said, with commendable patience. "Is there anything extraordinary about having a guest? Your right people have them — or don't they?"

Quite nimbly, Ina stepped into the breach.

"Why, of course they do, dad," she said. "Edie didn't mean to suggest that there was anything extraordinary about it, but

—well, you want us to help entertain this particular guest, don't you?"

"I hope, and I'm sure, that you will be the warmest of friends, Ina."

"Well, then," the younger daughter said soothingly, "we can't very well be warm friends without knowing who she is, can we?"

Mr. Valmer's eyes continued to twinkle as he considered Mrs. Fayles for a moment.

"Sounds odd, Ina—I concede that; but I'm sure that you can. Suppose, for the present, we say that Mary is simply one of us, and let it rest at that? Oh, there's no deep mystery, you know. I'll tell you all about her eventually, but for the moment there are reasons. I don't want the girl quizzed about herself, either. Please remember that!"

"Well?" breathed Ina.

"Well, now, as to what I wish you two girls to do," Mr. Valmer pursued. "First, I wish Mary to become one of your own particular circle—really one, you know."

"You—mean that you want her presented formally, like a débutante?" Mrs. Dinsmore asked thickly.

"Not too formally. You can attend to that in your own way, so long as the girl is properly introduced. I'm not much of a society person, you know," Mr. Valmer said impatiently. "Just how will you manage it?"

During these last fifteen seconds Mrs. Dinsmore had been staring fixedly at Penning, and at last the lawyer was giving a sign—the smallest nod, but unquestionably one of assent. A tremulous sigh came from Mrs. Dinsmore. She pulled herself together and faced her father.

"We—well, there are three or four of the girls coming in for luncheon to-morrow. That would make some sort of beginning," she murmured. "And there's an informal dance out at the country club—horribly informal—they all are. Then we might have a tea for her—say Wednesday of next week. Will that do, father?"

"Nicely, I should think."

"Only—dad!" Ina said gently.

"Well?"

"It's quite all right, of course, all of it; but some of the people we've known for a good while, and we *do* value their opinions. Do you know this Miss—"

"Please call her Mary."

"Mary, then. Are you intimately acquainted with her?"

"I have seen her, I think, five times, all told, including this afternoon," the remarkable Stephen declared.

"Er—yes! Well, don't you think, then, that before presenting her to anybody at all, it would be wise to let Edie and me get acquainted with her, so that—"

"You may make sure that she's acceptable," Mr. Valmer concluded for his daughter, and the enigmatic triumph of his smile was perhaps the most puzzling thing he had ever presented for the inspection of the two young women. "Will you step upstairs with me immediately, my children, and—get acquainted with Mary?"

IX

After dinner they held council in the Fayleses' suite—Ina and her husband and the Dinsmores. It was distinctly a secret gathering, accomplished deftly enough by their inconspicuous vanishings, one by one, from the family circle downstairs. If there was a chair, it was occupied by Edith.

"Well?" she said, when Mr. Fayles had browsed around for an ash receiver and settled down in his favorite corner. "We've gathered, automatically, to discuss her, haven't we?"

"Obviously," Fayles grinned.

"Do you know, Henry," submitted his sister-in-law, "I fancy that it's time *you* told something?"

"I?"

"Father consults you, you know, about a great many things he never bothers mentioning to any one else."

"I know he does, Edith, but he never consulted me about Mary, I assure you." Mr. Fayles grinned at his cigar. "I wish he had!"

"Why?"

"Because I'd have advised him to get her here sooner. She's a pippin, and just about as bright as they come!"

"Really?" breathed Ina.

"As a matter of fact, he's right," her sister conceded. "The girl's as pretty as a picture and—oh, apparently nice in every way. Only—how about you, Wells? Has father ever spoken of her to you?"

"Father rarely speaks of anything to me," Mr. Dinsmore said wearily, and shaded a nicely judged yawn, which indicated total lack of interest.

"That's not answering Edie's question, though," Ina said.

"Has to be answered directly, does it?

All right! Father, then, has never even suggested to me the existence of the young woman. I never heard of her, Edith, before you surged in with your eyes spitting fire—you look unusually well when they're spitting, honey; you ought to do it oftener—and told me about her. Is that enough?"

"Oh, I suppose so. We're not getting ahead very rapidly, are we?"

Mr. Fayles chuckled again.

"When a taciturn and slightly erratic individual like your father springs a high-class mystery of this kind, one doesn't hop to the correct answer in five minutes," said he. "By the way, does Barton know anything about her?"

"Barton!" said his wife, and flushed. "I don't know, Henry. I think he does. I—well, I tried to sound Barton before dinner."

"And?"

"Well, I didn't get down on my knees, but I did suggest that there might be a ten-dollar bill for him," Ina snapped. "All that Barton did was to shake his head and repeat that he couldn't say. He wasn't even decent enough to tell me whether he knew anything about her or not!"

"Penning, then, Ina? You're usually able to wheedle information out of Penning, you know."

Mrs. Fayles's color grew a trifle higher.

"I know that, but it was no use at all this time. I asked him flatly who Mary was, and where she came from, and why she was here—everything we've been wondering, of course—and he faced me with that fishy stare he can do so well when he wants to, and said that a lawyer couldn't very well discuss affairs which his client desired to keep secret."

"Admitted that much, did he?"

"Virtually."

"Well, that's kind of funny in itself, isn't it?" yawned Mr. Dinsmore.

"Not of necessity," said Fayles, who was by far the soundest reasoner of the group just now. "How about making a few inquiries of father?"

"We did," his wife said briefly.

"I know, and he put you off, of course; but I imagine that if you went to him again and—well, just pointed out, patiently and pleasantly, that he had created a rather unusual situation for everybody concerned, the girl included, he might see the wisdom of telling—"

"Oh, you ought to know father better than that by this time!" Ina said impatiently. "He'll tell just what he's sweetly pleased to tell about anything, and a herd of wild horses couldn't drag one single fact from him that he didn't feel inclined to divulge!"

"Well, the girl herself, then?"

"We don't dare!" Edith snapped. "Father forbade it, absolutely. He stressed that again, just before dinner, and he was quite emphatic about it. Under no circumstances is she to be quizzed!"

"And poor little Mary behaves as if she assumed that she had been explained to the highly interested family—which she probably does assume," Fayles mused. "Everything else apart, it's a bit rough on her to—"

"Never mind poor little Mary!" Mrs. Dinsmore all but hissed. "We—oh, why do we beat about the bush like this? Why don't we face the thing?"

"Face what?"

"Is father infatuated with this Mary person, or isn't he?" demanded the elder daughter.

Ina's lips compressed suddenly. Mr. Dinsmore gasped faintly. New ideas always met his brain with quite an impact. Fayles, however, merely threw back his head and laughed.

"At least, he's not that!" he said.

"How in the world do *you* know?" Ina asked fiercely.

"Well, I'm not particularly bright, perhaps, but I'm willing to give odds of a hundred to one, or so, that I can tell whether a man's in love with a woman, just by watching the way he looks at her for ten or fifteen minutes. Moreover, it's always a lot more obvious when a chap of father's age begins to lose his head. No—nothing like that's afoot; but there's something mighty odd about the way he stares at that kid. Like a scientist squinting through a microscope at something on a slide—that's as near as I'm able to hit it. Cold and impersonal, you know, but distinctly interested."

Mrs. Dinsmore's eye, hard upon her husband, was hot and cynical. Ina, however, nodded.

"He's right about that. I noticed it too," said the younger sister.

"Well, you'll pardon me," remarked Edith, "for lacking faith in this coldly impersonal interest when—"

"Oh, that's what it is, whether you lack faith in it or not," Fayles broke in. "Privately, I think there's a great deal of excitement here about nothing whatever. You'll find, when father's pleased to explain, that the answer is perfectly simple. Perhaps he's adopted the kid."

"He hasn't!" Ina said shortly. "I got that out of Penning. He said father had never mentioned such a thing to him at any time."

"All right! Then she's the daughter of an old friend, at another guess. Did he ever have an old friend named Allers?"

"Not in our time."

"It's thinkable that he may have had friends before you were born, my dear," Fayles grinned. "That, in all probability, is the nearest we're going to come to the truth for the present. And now may I just make one little speech?"

"Go on!"

"Well, it's admitted that this girl is nice in every way, isn't it — quiet, agreeable, and at least as cultured as any of us?"

"That's just it!" Edith cried. "She does seem nice, and—she can't be, very well. What's a nice girl doing—"

"And father unquestionably wishes her to be here?"

"Oh! Unquestionably!"

"Well, there's nothing much wrong about your father, Edie. I've never known a man with any higher principles," Fayles said seriously, "or with much better poise, taken all around. This is all a trifle odd, but it's not the first odd thing that he's done. There's always a beautifully robust possibility that father is having a little joke!"

"He never tried that sort of joke before!" Edith said acidly.

"Well, dad never repeats a joke," declared Ina. "He's punctilious about that!"

"Precisely. And here's still another point, which I'd also be willing to back as being somewhere near the answer—father doesn't quite approve either of you girls. Mary, on the other hand, looks like old-fashioned stock with old-fashioned training. Maybe she's here as an uplifting example."

"Ugh!" shuddered Edith.

"And whatever she may be, or for whatever reason she may be here, I suggest that we should just take the kid for what she seems to be, and should consider that she belongs."

Mr. Fayles's whimsical grin appeared again, and he waited for comment. Six eyes regarded him meditatively. Ina shrugged rather helplessly.

"Is there anything else that we can do?" she murmured.

"Nothing. And if we're satisfied to do that—"

"*She* ought to be—yes!" Mrs. Dinsmore concluded spitefully.

X

In point of fact, Mary was by no means entirely satisfied.

Not hypersensitive, perhaps, she was nevertheless too keenly observant. The studied carelessness with which one member of the family drifted away after another, while she herself rather diffidently demonstrated to Mr. Valmer how little he really knew of chess, was rather painfully significant to Mary.

They seemed to be avoiding her. Well, if it came to that, why shouldn't they, if they chose? Mr. Valmer, very likely, had been enlarging on her progress for a matter of three years—which was his privilege, too. They had probably failed to share his enthusiasm, and, to all intents, had remained their exalted selves, while Mary remained the factory girl—than which, to be sure, nothing in the world could have been much more natural.

Mary had heard a good deal of Stephen Valmer's daughters and their husbands from Mrs. Fairson—of the glittering suitors who had besieged the young women, and of the ultimate victors, scions of the ancient houses of Fayles and Dinsmore. Had she expected to be taken to their respective bosoms? Emphatically, she had not!

They had been nice enough at dinner, though, hadn't they? Having for no obvious reason anticipated a rather uncomfortable meal, Mary had been pleasantly astonished to find herself quite at home in an easy and rather gay atmosphere. Stephen's hour for dry witticism seemed to be dinner time. Mary had laughed quite sincerely at him, even if the others had only smiled perfunctorily.

There had been one unpleasant note, in a story, of considerable breadth, which Dinsmore chose to tell; and another, to Mary's mind, in the fact that Dinsmore's wife, with never a suggestion of disapproval, only laughed boredly at it. Curious that it should flash back so suddenly, but Mary had been reminded of that dreadful evening, four years ago, when Tom Masters, dining with them, had seen fit to relate a rather similar anecdote, although not nearly so broad, and had been ordered from the flat by Bill Allers. Times change, of course, and evidently they allowed themselves a little more latitude in this upper atmosphere; but no stories of that kind had ever ventured into the Fairson circle.

Mary did wish that, if they really were avoiding her, they had left without that indefinable little sneaking effect, and—oh, she felt that she was wholly, utterly absurd! She devoted herself to chess, and sought an early bed, relaxing gloriously.

She suddenly opened her eyes to bright sunshine.

She was still vaguely uncomfortable. A good, sharp gallop usually dispelled that sort of thing. Stephen had startled her, last evening, with the news that her horse from the Fairson establishment was even then in the Valmer stables. Mary took to the back roads and journeyed far, returning after noon, to find Ina Fayles looking for her.

" Good gracious! You have energy, haven't you?" that young woman observed. " I haven't been on a horse for two years. We thought you'd left for good, Mary. This luncheon's an early affair, you know —they want to go over to some fool tournament at Galton."

" I'm sorry! I'll hurry and dress."

" Don't! Breeches are all right for this crowd. Come along!"

" Oh, but will they—"

" They'll like you just as you are, Mary," Ina said cheerily; " and you'll like them. They're a good lot!"

Later, in the strangest way, small, dumfounding doubts began to creep into Mary's consciousness.

They were, of course, a good lot. They were the very people with whom, in her wildest dreams of three years ago, Mary had yearned to mingle. They were traveled and sophisticated and decorative, and none of them lacked animation—so much, at least, must be conceded. Even a transformed Mary, habituated to the better things now, should have been thrilled, if only just a little. And yet—

The sharp-faced girl with the thick, dark hair was a Mrs. Milner, and it appeared that Mrs. Milner had been having some trouble with her husband. It was trouble of a sort which might have been discussed a little less fully and with a shade less frankness; but for a time, as one of the rather rapt circle of listeners, Mary sought to appear sympathetic.

It seemed, presently, that at the culmination of the trouble — which had been reached at a Southern resort—it was not the moral foot of the husband which had slipped, but that of Mrs. Milner herself. Now, as Mrs. Milner put it, the gentleman was " sulking " somewhere afar, and if there really was any truth in the rumor that his trip had some connection with the fact that a well known dancing young woman had left her company last Saturday night, and disappeared, Mrs. Milner vowed to divorce him relentlessly.

While Mary regained normal respiration, the very dark girl, a Miss Forbes, commented at length upon the unfortunate affair. Her language, which suggested that of a muleteer distinctly out of temper, did not seem particularly to horrify the gathering, but it sent a succession of cold chills through Mary.

Through a cloud of cigarette smoke Miss Forbes propelled her views, which were positive and radical. She shortly passed from a survey of the case in point to a general consideration of sex relations. Moral —or immoral — equality, Mary inferred, had already been attained, but was not yet openly conceded by that fraction of the population still saddled with inhibitions and hypocrisy. Viewed from any possible angle, marriage, as an institution, was little short of a disreputable, ghastly crime. The goal was freedom, utter and absolute; and Miss Forbes's expounded conception of freedom, it occurred to Mary, would almost have warranted a descent of the police on the Valmer mansion.

Molly Sand, a quiet little thing with bobbed hair, came in for attention. Molly, evidently, was one of the kind that must be drawn out, and it was not such an easy process; but she did confess, eventually, that a certain man had gone back to Chicago, and had married a girl with whom he used to go to school, somewhere in central Illinois.

Details, mercifully, were suggested rather than related; but for some absurd reason, it seemed, Molly's father was insisting that she should give up her downtown studio and return to the family circle. After a time Molly, at best a weakling, began to cry a little. This drew down upon her Miss Forbes's wrath, as that lady pointed out the shameful folly, the abjectness, of the one-man attitude, considered from the mental, the moral, the physical, or any other standpoint.

Like a breeze from the open came the chatter of the solidly built girl just opposite Mary.

Dorothy Masters, just at that time, had gone quite mad on the wholesome gasoline motor. She had taken the new car's engine down from one end to the other, and had put it together again. Further, as Mary heard hungrily in snatches, she had shot big game in Africa and in India, she had hunted moose in Maine and ducks on Long Island, she had drawn from its native element everything finny, from brook trout to tarpon.

The rest of them were not feverishly interested, but Mary found her eyes clinging to Dorothy. When, quite suddenly, the two found themselves alone, the main body having hurried aloft to inspect a certain new coat of Ina's, a remark escaped Mary:

"*You* look real!"

"Hope I am," Dorothy laughed. "Why not?"

"I mean that you're different. You're —I'm not sure just what I do mean."

"Decenter?" the other girl suggested wonderingly.

"I suppose that's it."

Miss Masters's unrestrained laughter rang through the room.

"It's not possible that they shocked you?"

"Isn't it?"

"Evidently it is, then! I—why, that's perfectly incredible—Mary, is that your name? I didn't know that there was any one left in the world who could be shocked. I say, you're not just out of a convent?"

"Not exactly, but something rather like it, I fancy," Mary sighed. "May I ask what will sound like an odd question?"

"Shoot, my dear!" Miss Masters said cheerfully.

"Well, then—are they all like this?"

"All Ina's gang, you mean?"

"More than that—all rich people—that's what I'm trying to say. I'm poor, you know."

"So am I—beastly poor," the other girl said, although the wonder still lingered in her eye as she considered Mary. "I give it up. No—I suppose they're not, if it comes to that. Some of 'em do seem to make a business of taking the lid off the garbage pail and leaving it off, don't they? On the other hand, I'm bound to admit that I know some pretty prim people, here and there—not so many of them, and most of them are pretty elderly, but enough of 'em to prove that old-time respectability still exists."

"But can it be that these girls really—" Mary began.

"Oh, bunk!" said Miss Masters. "This particular crowd's pretty raw, Mary, but my private idea is that they take most of it out in talk. Forbes, for example. I have a notion that if a caveman really swooped down on Forbes, and tried to carry her off without benefit of clergy, he'd wind up in a police station. I don't know. Maybe not."

"You're not much interested?" Mary asked curiously.

"Not terribly. Are you, really?"

"Yes!"

"Why?"

"Because I had always supposed that people with plenty of money went after the best things in life, and not the worst."

"Well, that's a quaint thought!" the Masters girl laughed. "What difference does money make? Aren't there just as many rotters among the downtrodden poor as there are in this element?"

"No, I don't believe there are."

Dorothy shrugged as she found her own cigarette case and reached for the matches.

"Maybe you're right, Mary. Maybe it's just this crowd of Ina's, and crowds like it. Edie and Ina move among the very best people when they feel so inclined, you know. They must know how to mind their p's and q's on occasion, or the very best people would throw 'em into outer darkness; but perhaps the very best people are a good deal the same themselves, and —oh, look here! This thing's getting a bit deep. Let's drop it!"

"Very well," Mary sighed.

As she snapped her match into the tray, Miss Masters stared once more at Stephen's product.

"Well, don't look so frightfully distressed about it, you dear, lovely, funny little creature," she chuckled. "You'll get used to 'em in time."

"Do you think so?"

"Of course! And even if you don't, Mary, take one little piece of advice—don't show it quite so plainly."

"Why not show it?" Mary flared. "Does one have to be ashamed of wanting to be decent?"

Dorothy Masters, clearly no uplifter and repairer of worlds, blinked tolerantly at Mary and yawned.

"Guess not, strictly speaking," she said, smiling faintly. "Only, first and last, I'd say that one might stand to miss an awful lot of fun!"

XI

Ina's reappearance put an end to the conversation. It was resumed, rather oddly, on the side veranda of the country club, just before midnight.

Mary had been deserted, in distinctly mysterious fashion, by her partner—a certain Bobby Parks, who, fortune favoring, would graduate from one of the bigger colleges a little later in the spring. He had brought her here with much solemnity and had cautioned her to remain here; and now Mary was waiting, somewhat amused and a little puzzled.

Dorothy Masters appeared, quite alone.

"Have you seen Willy Trent?"

"I don't know him," said Mary.

"A blond young man, underfed and slightly drunk."

"I've seen several of them that seemed slightly drunk, and one or two were blond, but—no, I don't think he has passed this way while I've been here."

Dorothy Masters looked only slightly annoyed.

"Bobby planted you here to wait for him?"

"Yes."

"That's his regular trick about this time of night," mused Dorothy. "Where *is* that little fool, anyway? I saved him this next dance, because he threatened to weep in public if I didn't."

"You're not actually counting on it, are you?"

Dorothy glanced quickly at her.

"Good Lord! You aren't horrified at the dancing, too?"

"I'm not horrified at anything," Mary replied, a little impatiently.

"You look—"

"Well, at least, I'm not going around with my hands in the air, trying to reform the world, if that's what you mean. I like to dance, and this sort of thing is well enough for any one who fancies it, I suppose; but personally I'm not partial to being hugged, and massaged, and so on. Is it always like this?"

Miss Masters leaned against a pillar and considered her with a frown.

"Mary, *where* did you come from?" she asked.

"Boston."

"I thought it must have been Mars, my child! I—what did you ask me? No, it's not always like this—that is to say, it hasn't always been."

"Oh!" said Mary. "I thought—"

"Well, you were wrong. This is mild, you know, Mary—very, very mild. You should have been around the club here last winter. The board had to get together, finally, and lay some few restrictions on the informal affairs. Shame, too, that was! Four or five of the boys just quit cold."

"Too bad!" mused Mary.

"That's sarcasm, isn't it?" smiled Miss Masters, and it was apparent that her interest in Mary had begun to dwindle. "You're really thinking—"

"You'd never guess what I'm really thinking. Have you ever been in the halls where working girls—factory girls, that is—do their dancing?"

"I never have, Mary. Have you?"

"Yes! They have one or two very capable people on the floor to oversee the dancing. When any one tries *this* kind of thing—and it seldom happens—they're requested to leave the floor—and they do leave, too!"

Mary's cheeks reddened and her eyes snapped. Miss Masters remained entirely unimpressed. Indeed, nodding slowly and with the smallest touch of disgust, she opened eyes wherein interest in Mary Allers was moving swiftly toward the vanishing point.

"Got your number at last, my child!" she cried softly. "Settlement worker—really serious person. That's wicked! I thought that you were just a simple kid, and that we'd make you a member!"

"I—"

"*There's* that little rat, after all," Dorothy said, and paused just an instant to lay a hand on Mary's arm. "Here's your Bobby boy, too. Mary, just one more piece of advice!"

"Yes?"

"Put on your shell-rimmed spectacles

again, and live up to 'em—or else forget you ever owned a pair," breathed Miss Masters, and hurried off.

Young Mr. Parks, lurking mysteriously at the angle of the veranda, approached nimbly.

"Dot tryin' to horn in?" he queried.

"With us?"

"Aha!"

"No, she was—"

"Well, she didn't get away with it, anyhow. Wise kid, Dot! Regular two-fisted guy, too, but wise. Any other wise ones watchin' us?"

"Apparently not. Why?"

Young Mr. Parks wagged his head with exceeding canniness.

"This is important, kid!" said he. "We're not dancin' this one, you know—sittin' it out!"

He gripped her arm and led her toward the stairs.

"Summerhouse!" he hissed. "Don't look behind you. They know me—they watch me!"

Plainly, he was being humorous after his own fashion. Mary laughed, and hurried along at his side. They turned out of the drive, some forty feet beyond the clubhouse, into a narrower path, which wound away into pitchy darkness, Bobby's not too welcome grip still upon her arm.

"This," Mr. Parks said at last, with much satisfaction, "is it—and we are still alone. Step right in!"

"Isn't it a little secluded?" Mary asked, hesitating.

"Not near secluded enough," the young man chuckled, from the depths of the summerhouse. "Mind the step—that's it. Hah!" There was a creak as he sat down. "Say, the punch was rotten, wasn't it?"

"I just tasted it."

"Don't blame you; too rotten to do more than taste once. Makes a man sick, to come home for a day or two and find that nothing's any better, anywhere. Old club's turned into pure cheese. Might think there was a revenuer on duty to analyze their damned punch, when — where the Sam Hill are you, Mary?"

"Right here."

"Still standing?"

"Yes."

"Cease standing and sit down, kid!" Mr. Parks commanded jovially, and the hand that caught her wrist dragged Mary abruptly to the rustic seat beside him. "Now! I always deliver a short lecture first, you know. Listening?"

"I'm listening."

"In the first place, there's nothing ordinary about this—get that, my dear?" the rather incoherent young man explained. "What I mean is, it's nothing that anybody can just go out and buy. Comes in by airplane, straight from where they know the real goods and treat 'em as such! Can you beat that?"

"Er—I suppose not."

"No! Dumped in a quiet little spot—oh, away up near the border. If you want it, you drive up yourself and get it. Butch Garraway and I made the last trip, and they were some roads, too, this time of year. Stood the pater two new cord shoes and a rear spring, even if he don't know it yet." Mr. Parks laughed gayly, and from his section of the gloom there came a faint clinking and some impatient muttering. "Say, Mary! How fussy are you?"

"What do you mean?"

"This cup thing sticks, you know—always does when I'm trying to entertain a lady properly. Oh, all right! Stick and be damned! *Here!*"

Cold metal suddenly met Mary's hand.

"Take her straight from the flask, Mary! Being done a lot this year, but it does seem sort of indecent when you've only known a girl for an hour."

"What is it—whisky?"

"Whisky? *Nectar!*" Mr. Parks's slightly awed voice said. "Nectar the high gods would have climbed clean down to earth just to sniff!"

"Well, I don't care for any nectar, thank you!"

"Huh?"

"Please don't stick that thing under my nose again," Mary said sharply. "I don't like the smell of whisky."

"Why, Mary, this is all right!" the astonished young man assured her. "It couldn't possibly be any more all right. Been right down there in my locker ever since we hauled it in, and I've got a fastening on that a safe cracker couldn't get through. Just sneak down and fill up the little tank here on occasions like this, and—oh, don't be afraid, Mary! I don't blame you. Some of the stuff's enough to take the paint off a ship, but *this*—"

"Thank you, *no!*" said Mary.

There was a small, thunderstruck pause.

"Say, is this some new fad?" young

Mr. Parks asked. "D'ye know, you're the second girl this week to refuse a drink!"

"Really?"

"Positive fact, my dear!" sighed Mary's escort.

There was another pause, which was one, apparently, of pure delight, for gurglings came through the darkness, followed, eventually, by a long breath.

"Heigho! You're just ruining this party for yourself, Mary."

"Perhaps," said Mary. "If the ceremony's over, shall we go back?"

"Oh, not yet! We didn't come out here just to go back."

"No? Why did we come?"

Mr. Parks relieved himself of a low, rich, pleased laugh.

"'*Tis* something new!" he stated. "This other girl I mentioned handed me the same line. Honey, we're wasting an awful lot of time, aren't we?"

"Yes!" Mary said tartly.

"Ha! *That* sounds kind of sane and natural and encouraging!" Mr. Parks cried, and, slipping a strong arm about Mary, he dragged her to him. More than this, his free hand went under Mary's chin and turned it upward with a jerk. "Few seconds, there, I'll swear you had me guessing!" he chuckled. "Oh, you little—"

"Let me go!" Mary gasped.

"Hey?"

"Let me go!"

Young Mr. Parks giggled joyously.

"You've got about as much chance of gettin' away as a—" he began. "*Hey!*"

Through the gloom, something resembling a distant pistol shot echoed. Its source had been in the meeting of Mary's firm palm and Bobby Parks's plump cheek.

"Now will you let me go?" Mary panted. "You—you unspeakable—"

"Oh, I say, Mary!" a voice said gently, from just outside the summerhouse. "I'm here if you need me, you know."

"Who's—that?" Mr. Parks managed.

The vines rustled. It seemed that some one had thrust in head and shoulders from the outer side of the skeleton structure.

"Name's Dinsmore," that gentleman's languid voice chuckled. "You run along now, Bobby, like a good little chap!"

"Say! What the—" Mr. Parks began, bewildered.

"Because, if you don't, 'pon my word, I'll totter in and tell your father about his two cord shoes and his busted spring!" the lazy voice chuckled further. "Ha! That got you, did it?"

Young Mr. Parks, apparently, was leaving. Behind him trailed a sulphurous muttering. Wells Dinsmore strolled into the summerhouse.

"Rather lucky I was out there—eh, Mary?"

"I—yes—thank you very much. I couldn't have believed—"

"Oh, no end of young bounders like Parks around, you know," Edith's husband sighed. "Sit down again, Mary, for a minute, and calm yourself. Feathers all ruffled up?"

"I'm afraid they are. I hadn't expected anything like that."

"Never can tell what 'll happen to an unprotected young girl these days—if she's on the square, as you are, I mean," Mr. Dinsmore said, without great indignation. "All right now, though. I'm glad I came down here to the favorite old nook! Always sneak away from these infernal dance-fests when I can, you know. I simply can't stand 'em. They're nothing at all for a man who thinks, or tries to think, intelligently."

"No, I really don't think they are, Mr. Dinsmore."

"Going to call me Wells, weren't you? Father specified that."

"Wells, then," Mary smiled.

"No, they're not," the gentleman pursued sadly. "And I do try to do that—think intelligently, I mean—even if I get mighty little credit for it."

"I'm sure—" Mary began vaguely.

"Or no credit at all—that's nearer the truth. Fact is, Mary, I'm rather a misunderstood man. Not making a bid for sympathy or anything like that, but nobody seems to understand me."

"Your wife, of course, least of all?" Mary queried dryly.

"Gad! Have you noticed that, in just the little time you've been around?" Dinsmore cried. "Why, that's remarkable! That's positively astounding! That's—that's—"

"What I meant—"

"I know just what you meant, but I had no idea it was so obvious," Mr. Dinsmore went on fervently. "Fact is, it's not, to most people, Mary; it's only a girl like you who can see the truth so readily. Not saying a solitary word against Edie, you understand. Edith is wonderful!

Only, she's Valmer's daughter, and I—I'm nobody. Never had a chance to be anybody, Mary, because nobody ever really understood me; but *you* do!"

"Do you have to hold my hand to tell me this?" Mary inquired.

"I'd love to, if you don't really mind," Edith's husband stated, and tightened his grip. "It's the dearest and softest little hand, all—all full of character and understanding," he added, and broke off with a very effective sigh. "Mary!"

"What?"

"Do you believe in love at first sight?" asked Mr. Dinsmore.

"*What?*" gasped Mary.

"Because I never did, but I do now," the gentleman hurried on, and came much closer. "Mary, when I first saw you—yesterday, it was, and yet it seems as if we'd known one other for ages. Perhaps we have, Mary! That sort of thing does happen; two people meet and—and love, and then meet again, centuries later. When I first saw you—"

"Wait a minute!" Mary said, with some difficulty.

"But—"

"You're what is crudely known as a fast worker, aren't you?"

"Oh, but, I say, Mary! When a—a man loses himself—when he bares his heart to a girl because something—er—stronger than himself seems to grip him—"

"Well, I don't like fast workers any better than I like that Parks boy's liquor; and I have a particular antipathy to them when they're married. I consider you, Mr. Dinsmore, a particularly cheap cad. Is that sufficiently specific?"

"It—it—gad, it's murder!" Mr. Dinsmore stammered. "That's what it is, murder, when a chap feels as I do! It's as heartless as—where are you going, Mary?"

"Home."

"Oh, but—I say, don't do that! Don't race off like that, Mary!"

"Why not?"

"Make talk, you know. They're a savage lot of gossips around here. And, what's more, if Edith—"

"I'm not going to tell Edith about you," Mary said disgustedly; "but I'm going home."

She was out of the summerhouse now, and walking toward the club, with Mr. Dinsmore trailing after her in some mental perturbation. It was a night of unseasonable warmth, and several of the couples were strolling about in the outer air—almost respectable couples, Mary reflected with a little shudder, since at least they were not publicly making love.

There, too, was Henry Fayles, alone with his cigar, looking at them in his rather keen fashion. There was something stable and virile about Henry, too. He lacked Dinsmore's decorative effect, and, Mary felt with a grateful throb, probably lacked the undesirable qualities that went with it.

"Trying to outdistance Wells?" Henry inquired curiously, with his little smile.

"I—no, I'm just going home."

"Not so early?"

"I think so. Will you—or Mr. Dinsmore can do that—just say that I have the traditional headache, or something of the kind?"

"Let Wells do that," Fayles said suddenly. "I'll take you home, Mary."

"Thank you."

"Run you right back in my own car, child," pursued Mr. Fayles. "Shall I bring it around while you're getting your wraps, or shall I get the wraps and walk around to the garage with you?"

"The latter, if you'll be so good."

Fayles sped away. Dinsmore, having twice glanced uneasily from Mary to his wife, who stood chatting in the open doorway of the clubhouse, came to a reasonably intelligent decision and lazily ascended the steps.

Mary, her lips tight, moved on a little distance. Very shortly Ina's husband had placed the cape over her shoulders and was walking at her side.

"Something has upset you, Mary," he stated. "What was it?"

"Nothing."

"Something has, nevertheless," Fayles insisted. "I wish you'd tell me."

"There is really nothing to tell."

"Wells has been up to his regular tricks, perhaps?"

Mary said nothing at all. Fayles glanced down at her softly, almost tenderly, and smiled a little. Then he glanced over his shoulder. Behind them nobody was in sight.

"Mary, I wish you'd be quite frank with me," he said gently. "Whatever the rest of them may be, you can trust *me*, and—"

"Mr. Fayles!"

"Eh?"

"Is it really imperative for you to put

your arm around me, to assure me of that?" Mary demanded desperately, as she stopped short.

"Er — no, probably not," Fayles laughed, and dropped the arm. "No idea of offending you, Mary, or—"

"No, I understand!" Mary said bitterly. "You're not the pretty type, like Dinsmore. You're the self-contained, patient, he-man variety, quite sure of yourself, and—oh, I think you're beastly! Is that Mr. Valmer's chauffeur, over there by his car?"

"Seems to be; but I'm going to drive you home, Mary, and—"

"But you're not!" the girl corrected. "Jenkins!"

"Yes, miss?" said the Valmer driver.

"Take me home, please, and then come back for the others," Mary said, as she stepped in. "No. Mr. Fayles isn't coming with me."

Stephen had long retired when she reached the house. This was rather fortunate, for in that feverish hour Mary was entertaining certain pronounced views about Mr. Valmer's family which she could hardly have refrained from communicating to the gentleman himself. With her lips even tighter, she hurried to her own rooms and locked the door. The lips relaxed only when, after a period of angry tossing, she fell asleep.

The habit of early rising had never been cultivated by the other ladies of the household, who were rarely in evidence much before noon, but it remained strong in Mary. She emerged from an unpleasant dream and made instinctively for her riding clothes. Then, just as instinctively, she turned away from them with a frown, and ended by donning the simplest little gown in her rather extensive collection. This morning, at least, Mary was not perfectly attuned to the wealthy state.

She breakfasted hurriedly and alone, causing Barton to grow quite solicitous about her lack of appetite. She hurried from the house, too, and into the clean outer air and the bright sunshine. Down near the gateway of the Valmer estate, almost hidden by a budding bush, she sat down upon a stone bench—to think.

Something was radically wrong.

In a hazy way, something had been wrong for weeks, but it was acutely and painfully wrong this morning. Once upon a time, she had craved what had seemed decent things. Well, she had plenty of them now, and to her possibly archaic way of thinking they were a long, long way from being decent. Why, at home, even in these modern days, people like Bobby Parks and Dinsmore would have been in such complete disfavor that they would have been almost certain to ride away in an ambulance after colliding with Bill Allers's fists. Brutal and elemental and uncultured and all that, but still—decent!

That wretched word seemed to be playing havoc with Mary this morning, just as it had done once before, if in another manner.

With her hands clasped, she gazed gloomily down through the gateway toward the State road. Mary had reached that distressing condition where, with all one's desires realized, one finds genuine happiness quite as distant as before. In fact, in all her days she had never been more thoroughly wretched than she found herself just now.

Well, there must be a sufficiently simple answer. Surely the whole population of this presumably rarer atmosphere couldn't be of the same stripe. And yet, to the casual observer, that gathering at the club last night had been quite normal. Mrs. Fairson, as Mary recalled vividly, had piled veto upon veto, when one or another member of her own little circle had suggested bringing this or that friend to the house. So perhaps the hideously great majority *was* just as—

Mary started suddenly and leaned forward, her eyes upon the road. Red color surged to her cheeks, too, and her eyes sparkled strangely. For the moment, Mary even ceased breathing.

XII

FARTHER forward leaned Mary—and then, with something of a jerk, she sat back again; but her eyes did not leave the gateway and the road beyond. From that direction there came a cheerfully whistled tune and the sound of a firm, quick step.

There was the broad-shouldered figure in the very plain sack suit and the curly hair and all. She had not been wrong—it was none other than the apparently unvamped Jimmy Hammond, of the Mors mill—*coming in here!*

Just why she should have been so much startled at the phenomenon, Mary did not pause to wonder — though she knew, of course, that in the nature of things he should have been at work at his press at this hour. It—it—no, it wasn't the man himself who had caused the excitement in her gentle bosom. It was what he symbolized so perfectly — the free, clean independence, the self-reliance and—

"*Huh?*" escaped the approaching Mr. Hammond, as he stopped short just inside the gate.

In his own way, he seemed quite as much dumfounded as had Mary — which was inexplicably disconcerting, and caused her flush, just subsiding comfortably, to mount again. Hands hanging limp, chin thrust out, mouth open a little, he remained motionless for a matter of seconds; but after that his smile came suddenly—an unbelieving, wonderful smile. His hat came off, and he advanced upon Mary Allers quite as if expecting to see her vanish suddenly.

"It—it *isn't* you, is it?" he asked.

"It is—I!" Mary confessed.

"No, but I mean—well, I know I'm an idiot, of course," the young man floundered. "I probably look like an idiot, and I feel like one in asking such a thing."

"Asking what?"

"Well — say, you'll forgive me, but I can't help it—did you ever work in a stamping mill?"

"Yes!" said Mary.

"The—the Mors place, about three years ago?"

"Yes!"

"Well, I'll — say, I — well, upon my word!" gasped the newcomer.

He seemed unable to get any farther. Certain changes came to his apparently fixed smile, however. The quality of humor entered, and his eyes twinkled. Thrice he essayed speech before he succeeded in saying:

"Well, dog-gone it! I might have known it all the time, if I'd been born with brains. You were there just for a lark!"

"It—it wasn't much of a lark," replied Mary's strangely numbed tongue.

"No, but you thought it was going to be when you undertook it, I'll bet; and it would have been, if you had tackled it in the right spirit. They're an awfully good crowd down there, once you're used to them, or if you really like them as—as much as I do." The enthusiasm of the young man's speech dwindled in the most peculiar way as his gaze remained fixed upon Mary. "And so, after all, you were a rich girl!"

"I—no!"

"You know what I mean—not one of the crowd in the mill, of course. I'm so infernally thick that it never even occurred to me! Ten minutes' thought at any time would have told me that a girl like you couldn't possibly be one of them. I say, I'm not insane, you know!" the young man declared, drawing rein suddenly. "I forget that you don't even know me!"

"Why, yes, I do!" Mary said quickly, and managed to blush even again.

"What?"

"That is, I—I mean, I remember—seeing you down there and—"

"*Really?*"

"And I know your name is Hammond, and—and that's really all I do know, of course," Mary concluded bravely.

A long, slow, remarkable breath fluttered from Mr. Hammond's lips. His smile, it appeared, was a permanent expression.

"Oh, that's wonderful!" he whispered. "I never thought that—well, by the way, all I ever knew of you was that your name is Mary Allers. That's not your real name, of course, but—"

"It is, though!"

"Is it? Well, it's a beautiful name—Mary!" the other rambled on.

Quite uninvited, he seated himself beside her. A little space he devoted entirely to consuming Mary with his eyes.

"You know that you covered your tracks remarkably well, young woman, don't you?" he said.

"Why?"

"That girl you used to travel around with—what's her name? Oh, Jenny Ross, I believe. Well, when you disappeared so suddenly, I—I—well, I asked Jenny what had become of you, and where I could find you, because—well, I asked her, at all events, and she refused to tell me a single detail about you. I asked her half a dozen times, all told, until I began to feel it was getting a bit ridiculous. I never could understand just why she wouldn't tell, but I do now!" he ended, with a chuckle. "And if only—"

"Are you still working there?" Mary asked suddenly.

Mr. Hammond, his smile departing at last, nodded.

"Yes, I'm still there—or yes, ma'am, I suppose I'd better say."

"You'd better say nothing of the kind!" Mary said crisply. "How is it that you're not there this morning?"

The newcomer gravely studied his twiddling hat.

"There was a little job up here I had to do," he explained.

"For Mr. Valmer?"

"Yes."

"You know him?"

"I know him a little, and he—he knows my work. This job he—er—thought nobody else could do, so I had to get the morning off and come up and attend to it."

"Odd!" breathed Mary.

"His thinking that nobody else could do the job?"

"I didn't mean that, Mr. Hammond. I meant that it was odd that you should have turned up in this particular place just when I was thinking of the factory."

"Do you think about it sometimes?"

"Naturally."

"But you don't wish you were back?"

"No—I don't know that I do," Mary hesitated. "But—"

"Because that sort of thing's all right for the girls that are born to it and used to it, but it's not all right for a girl like you," Mr. Hammond submitted. "Well enough to try it for a while, to see what it's like, or—or to get data, or whatever the reason may have been that made you try it; but—oh, no, you're not fitted for that sort of thing!"

"Why not?"

"Oh, because you're altogether too fine and delicate and beautiful and high-bred ever to fit into that sort of atmosphere! When you were in it, you looked so frightfully out of place that—well, I don't know that I meant to say all that, Miss Allers, even if it is the truth. What I meant was —I say, you're not bothered with the idea of wanting to be one of the smart people, are you?"

"Possibly. I—"

"Don't be!" said Mr. Hammond. "That sort of thing's well enough in its way, and sometimes it takes a long while to get enough of it, but you *can* get enough. I—I knew a fellow once with a lot of money who tried it out to the limit, and he —ah—did!" he concluded rather enigmatically. He rose briskly. "You'll have to excuse me for sitting down and talking to you like this, but I was so surprised to see you I couldn't help it."

"Well? Why not sit down again and talk a little longer?" Mary suggested.

"No, I guess I'd better get on my job now," the honest fellow replied firmly. "Do you live here now?"

"I'm just visiting."

Quite in the approved workman fashion, Mr. Hammond bobbed his head.

"Yes, miss—and please excuse my asking. I suppose I haven't any right to say anything like this, but—but I'm mighty glad to have seen you again, and I hope we may meet again, some time."

"Yes, I — hope so, too," said Mary's rather small voice.

Another bob, and Mr. Hammond was striding up the drive.

Mary's gaze—a very deep and thoughtful one—remained fixed upon his broad back as it receded; and after it had vanished around the curve in the drive, her gaze remained fixed upon the spot where it had been. Mary's lovely eyes were round, too, and her breathing had grown quite rapid. She was not entirely sure, but from certain sensations within her gentle bosom, she suspected that she was about to find herself at last!

Because *there* was a man!

Oh, no, no, no! She wasn't particularly interested in the individual himself, but she was passionately interested in what he represented. There was not a Parks or a Dinsmore, but a *man*—and he came, not from the Parks and Dinsmore section of society, but of her own people.

Once upon a time she had loathed that stratum, had fancied everything within it poor and cheap and unworthy. Why? Well, wholly and solely because there had been nothing within her vision with which to draw comparisons. Now, in the clearest and sharpest way, the young Hammond person had presented himself — and had vanished again, in all probability, out of her life, since his purpose had been served —and at last Mary understood!

Hammond, of course, was a worker of a superior type. He had read, and had done his own thinking—his speech betrayed that. There was an instinctive refinement about him that many of his fellows lacked; but even the coarsest of them, as they appeared to Mary just now, was worth ten thousand Dinsmores.

"Good morning, Mary," said Mr. Penning, pausing.

"Oh!" gasped Mary.

"I startled you? Pardon me."

"I—I hadn't expected you, or any one else, to be about so early," said Mary.

The attorney sighed.

"Oh, I'm like the fireman and the policeman, always on duty," he said. "Mr. Valmer wanted me over here early, and I'm here. We seem very thoughtful this morning!"

"We are," said Mary. "Mr. Penning, you—you've lived a lot and seen a lot, haven't you?"

"I've seen a good deal, without doing very much living. Why?"

"Well—don't misunderstand me, please, but—are all the people in—in this Valmer class as lazy and unprincipled as the few I have met?"

"That's quite a direct way of putting it, Mary!" the attorney chuckled. "Still, I know what you mean, of course, and—yes, a lot of 'em are, I suppose. Not all, by any means, but a good many. You don't approve of them?"

"Do you?"

"I'm not paid to have opinions of just that character."

"But Mr. Valmer—"

"Oh, Valmer himself's very much all right, Mary," Mr. Penning said hastily. "All old-fashioned ideals and concepts, and so on. Queer chap in some ways—all up in the air with enthusiasm one moment and off in one of his black rages the next; but we all have our queer little kinks, you know, and his are harmless. Fundamentally, Valmer's the soundest individual you ever met!"

"I know it—he's really good, and that's why I'd—"

She paused. Mr. Penning, whose fading eyes saw much, pricked up his ears interestedly.

"Why you'd what, Mary?"

"Well, why I'd hate to disappoint him by not becoming one of them, if that's what he wished to make me."

"Why, I fancied that you had already become—"

"I haven't!" Mary interrupted fiercely. "And I thank Heaven that I haven't! Mrs. Fairson and her friends were wonderful, but if these people really are what I thought I wanted to be, I was wrong, and —I want to go back!"

"My child!"

"You know Mr. Valmer better than I. Would he let me do that?"

"Willingly?"

"Of course!"

"He would not! He—" began Mr. Penning, and there his voice trailed off to nothing at all.

No sheet of white paper could have been any more blank than was the lawyer's countenance just then, but his capable brain clicked ahead at the liveliest speed.

For one thing, he flattered himself that he could tell when a woman's mind was fully made up to a given course of action—and Mary's mind was visibly in that condition. For another, Mr. Valmer, yesterday afternoon, had gone quite mad on his character foundation scheme, pacing the library and outlining to Penning the most impossible plans, bound to involve money in sums which caused the attorney's heart to skip several beats. Nor would there be any simple way of giving Stephen pause while day by day he could look upon this lovely girl, the perfect example of what could be done with extremely raw material.

But should Mary elect to remove her charming self—Mr. Penning cleared his throat and the upward roll of his eyes was almost pious.

"My dear," said he, "I fear that you fail to realize my rather peculiar position here. You're seeking advice?"

"Certainly."

"It would be simply impossible for me to advise you in a matter of this kind, Mary."

"Yes, but—"

"And may I say another thing? This little conversation, so far as I am concerned, never took place. I am not entirely cowardly, but, in dealing with Mr. Valmer, there are some things in which I do not care to be involved. I know how much store he has set on this little experiment with you."

"That's just it!" Mary said, almost bitterly. "After all the money that he has spent—"

"Pshaw! The money!" interrupted Mr. Penning. "That's of no consequence, one way or the other—to Mr. Valmer, I mean to say. His fortune is growing in a fashion that's almost outrageous, and a matter of twenty or thirty thousand dollars is of very little moment."

"Is that truly and literally so?" Mary asked eagerly.

"That, my dear young lady," said the lawyer, growing still more bland and kindly, " is a fragment of information which you may regard as confidential, if you choose, and incontestably true."

" Then does anything else *really* matter, Mr. Penning?"

The attorney, avoiding her eyes, twitched down his coat collar and turned toward the house.

" My dear Mary, we have our personal problems—all of us. We must solve them for ourselves as seems best," he concluded helpfully. " In my own case, I have found that heart and head, given free rein to work together, almost invariably produce the right answer. Good morning!"

He moved away with his elderly shuffle—a gait very different from the Hammond stride; and after him, too, Mary stared.

Mr. Penning was whistling softly, but quite audibly on the still morning air. That was queer. One wouldn't have thought of Mr. Penning as a whistler; but he was a good old soul, wasn't he?

" Heart and head, given free rein—"

Mary's hands clasped, and her pretty lips pursed. For a long, long time she sat upon the stone bench, with her eyes on the drive, while cars whizzed by on the State road outside the gates, and people laughed, and an occasional delivery wagon passed to the measure of thudding hoofs, and the sun rose higher and higher and higher.

When at last she got up, she was another Mary. Decision was writ large upon her, but there was caution, too. Turning from the drive to one of the little paths, she walked swiftly toward the Valmer mansion—not toward the front entrance, but straight for the pretty little side door hidden by the rose arbor.

XIII

Time had been when Mr. Penning vastly enjoyed an hour with Stephen and his favorite nephew, John Valmer.

Similar in so many things—of which a terrific and not very logical stubbornness was emphatically one — the two Valmers had been close chums for years. Dry wit had had a habit of sparkling through such hours, and there had been something very pleasing and comfortable in watching the pair together, John so nicely filling the gap created by the nonappearance of any son in Stephen's family.

But Penning enjoyed those hours no longer. They had grown few and far between, occurring mostly when some detail of John's considerable estate was to be looked after, and they had been entirely spoiled by John's desertion to a lower layer of humanity.

This little eccentricity Stephen, himself sufficiently eccentric, had chosen never quite to forgive. As for John, the young man was holding more and more stiffly aloof from his uncle. Mr. Penning was accustomed to heave a sigh of relief when the business had been concluded, John had returned to his ridiculous factory, and Mr. Valmer, more often than otherwise, had developed a fit of ill temper that was likely to last for days.

This morning's session was an exception to the general rule, however. John, as it presently dawned upon Mr. Penning, was not nearly so aloof as usual. Stephen, to be sure, remained tart in the extreme, grunting at his nephew, grunting at Penning as he ordered him to read this or that bit aloud, grunting as he indicated the lines on which John must sign his name; but a remarkable change had come over John since their last gathering.

He had grinned when he entered the den, just as he used to grin in the dear old days. He had pulled himself up and scowled at Stephen's unenthusiastic greeting, to be sure; but within five minutes Penning had caught the young man grinning again, as he read through a certain document. Yes, and he was humming to himself, too, Mr. Penning noted with wonder. He hadn't heard John Valmer hum for three full years! More than this, John attempted a joke; and when it met with Stephen's vinegar grunt and dropped lifeless, he only chuckled. Presently he essayed another joke, and at this one Stephen involuntarily gave vent to a sound almost resembling a chuckle.

John, in fine, was in high good humor this beautiful morning, and he really seemed to be trying to infect Stephen. Several times Mr. Penning meditatively scratched his ear with the end of his fountain pen, and grew almost gay. The mellow atmosphere was dissipated, however, by Stephen's final surly command:

" Take 'em downstairs in the library and fix 'em up, Penning!"

" Er—very well," sighed the attorney, and rose and fled.

" 'By, John!" Stephen added briefly, as he picked up a book.

" Throwing me out, uncle?"

"What's that?"

"Am I to go at once?" John grinned.

"By all means!" snapped Mr. Valmer. "Don't let me keep you from your damned steam engine, or whatever it is that you work at!"

"It's a press—and it's not likely to miss me much for an hour or two. Don't have to get back and feed it, you know."

"Huh?" said his uncle, and peered at him.

John Valmer crossed his legs and smiled serenely.

"I'd really like to stay and chat a while, if you don't mind," he said.

Stephen Valmer peered again and laid aside his book.

"What the devil's the matter with you, John?" he demanded. "You look almost natural."

"Is that a compliment or just a mean one?"

"Put a respectable suit of clothes on you, and you *would* look natural!" old Mr. Valmer mused aloud. "Where'd you buy that trash you're wearing?"

"Down at Finkelberg's, where a lot of our men do their trading," John said cheerfully. "It isn't trash, by the way. This suit cost thirty-five dollars, earned money. They run as low as twelve in Finky's place."

"Do they?" Stephen sneered. "Doubtless I'm unable to grasp the beauties of that one. With your wealth, and the big things you might be doing—"

"Uncle!" John cried, and held up a restraining hand.

"What?"

"Suppose we don't get into another argument on that question just now," said young Mr. Valmer. He rose impulsively and crossed to his uncle's chair. There, just as he had been wont to do as a half grown boy, he perched on the wide arm and laid a hand on Stephen's shoulder, causing that gentleman to stare up somewhat blankly. "It's not worth it, you know."

"You have always considered that my opinions were worth flouting!"

"Well, uncle, sometimes a man does make a mistake, doesn't he?" John said, ever so gently. "And if he's the kind who naturally takes a good while to reason anything out, perhaps he doesn't see his mistake at once; but, unless he happens to be a thoroughgoing jackass, when he does see it he admits it, eh?"

"Why — what — what—" Mr. Valmer gasped.

"Exactly," said his nephew. "I was wrong!"

"You're really sick of your confounded proletariat?"

"Oh, not just that. They're a good lot, uncle—a mighty good lot, most of them. I've enjoyed working down there much more than you'd ever believe. Only, these last few weeks particularly—I don't know."

"Johnny, are you coming back home here to live?" Stephen demanded.

John patted the shoulder affectionately.

"Well, I thought that perhaps, if you'd let me, I might look in on the old room and see if it still seemed able to hold me. It's high time I took a vacation, anyway. I haven't missed a full day in three years!"

"You—you want to come home for good—to quit your fool job and—and—" Mr. Valmer gurgled joyously, and came bodily out of his chair.

"Uncle," said John, with a light sigh, "I shouldn't be a darned bit surprised if that's just what I did want to do!"

"Well, the Lord be praised!" Stephen vociferated. He caught his nephew's big hand and wrung it and wrung it again, and, in fact, kept on wringing it. "Reason's climbed back on her throne, and the boy's sane again! Why, that's the finest thing that has happened since — John! What was it?"

"What was what?"

"The blessed thing that brought you to your senses!"

John shrugged his shoulders, and his smile was almost as dreamy and languid as that of Mr. Dinsmore.

"Why, nothing specific, I think, uncle. Sometimes a notion just peters out of its own accord, doesn't it?"

"And sometimes it takes a mighty long time, because a man's too mulish to admit the truth, even to himself!"

"Likely enough," John grinned, and it was plain that this morning he could not be offended.

"But so long as it did happen—John, I can't tell you how glad I am!"

"Well, I'm glad you're glad, uncle. I'm a bit glad myself, I think," the nephew chuckled. "No guests in my room, are there, by the way?"

"Nobody has occupied it since you lost your balance."

"Then I think I'll get in there and see

how the old things look—the old togs, too. They'll be a trifle out of date, won't they?"

"I'll send for Ferguson, John—have him here in two hours. He'll have some respectable things on you in two days, if I insist, and—"

"Oh, it's not as urgent as all that," John laughed. "I say, don't mention it to the girls, will you—my being back?"

"Er—"

"I want to give 'em a little surprise at lunch, you know. I'll get Barton to brush me off some things, and I'll tell him to lay the extra place and say nothing. I'll see that I happen in a bit late, after they're settled down, and—ha, ha, ha!" laughed the remarkable John.

Once more their hands met and clasped, hard and heartily. John sauntered away, humming blithely to himself. Mr. Valmer plumped back into his chair and gayly bit the end from a fresh cigar, without ever looking around for the clipper. He hummed a little, too, and muttered pleasantly to himself. His eyes shone happiness.

Out in the corridor John chuckled merrily, and sought the door of his good old room. Fresh and crisp and airy Mrs. Dwight had kept it, under Stephen's orders. Silently, cheerily, it greeted its tenant and made him welcome.

Young Mr. Valmer rang for the butler—and Barton found him sprawled in his one-time favorite chair, grinning.

"'Lo, Barton!" said John, with a wave of the hand. "Back, you see!"

"To—to stay a while, Mr. John?"

"A good long while, I think, Barton!"

The butler's rather gloomy countenance expanded in a smile.

"Well, that's very good news, sir!" he cried.

"Thanks. May I ask you to do a little valeting for me?"

"Anything in the world that I'm able to do, sir!"

"Once upon a time, ages ago, I used to own a fuzzy gray sports suit, Barton—a trifle gay, but comfortable, and calculated to display the perfect athletic figure—mine!" young Mr. Valmer pursued airily. "I wonder if that's still about the place!"

"It's in your closet, sir, all pressed and covered up," the butler reported, and hurried in that direction. "I attended to all your clothes, sir, when Mr. Valmer said you wasn't going to send for 'em, a long time ago. This one, Mr. John?"

"That's the one! Any shoes around to go with it?"

"Right here, sir."

"Fine! Now, will you look me up a respectable shirt and the rest of the stuff?"

His bright smile persisting, the butler busied himself, while young Mr. Valmer lolled back and alternated between watching Barton and glancing from the window at the Scarford landscape, rich with the pale, tender green of early spring. He yawned, indicating complete indifference, as he began:

"How are things in general around the old place, Barton?"

"Why, very much the same as usual, sir."

"Lots of entertaining, I suppose?"

"Not a great deal, Mr. John."

John stretched.

"Mrs. Fayles always managed to have some one hanging about," he mused. "Hasn't she anybody at all these days?"

"Mrs. Fayles—why—um—" The butler hesitated. "There's only one guest in the house at present, sir—Miss Allers."

"Friend of Mrs. Fayles?"

"I—don't think so, sir."

"Oh, one of Mrs. Dinsmore's crowd, then?" John reflected, but the butler, occupied with shoes, failed to answer. "Allers? I don't seem to remember any one named Allers."

"A young lady, sir."

"The Virginia Allerses, I suppose?"

"I couldn't say, Mr. John."

"Although there was a family of that name in Rhode Island, wasn't there?"

"I couldn't say that, either, Mr. John."

"What's the matter, Barton — losing your curiosity as you get older?"

"I beg pardon, sir?"

"You used to have the pedigree of every one who ever entered the house, unless my memory's playing tricks."

"Well, you—if you'll excuse my saying it, Mr. John," said Barton, with a flustered little smile, "you was never very inquisitive about 'em, or much interested, sir."

"Um — that's probably true enough, too," John reflected, with a grin. "I feel interested in everything now, though—it's so infernally good to get back! This Miss—Allers, was it?—is just here for a day or two, and then we'll have the old home to ourselves, eh?"

"Well, I—I don't know as to that, either. I think—that is, it seems as if somebody said, Mr. John—that the young lady was remaining quite a time."

John gazed upon the butler's broad back, and smiled. Then, as Barton turned around, the young man yawned again.

"Quite a while, eh? Oh, well—can't be helped, I suppose. Is she—"

The butler straightened up with a determination which John failed to note, and which he would have failed to understand, had he noted it.

"Will that be all, Mr. John, or shall I assist you to dress?" he interrupted.

"Eh? In a hurry?"

"There's a great deal to be done to-day, sir, begging pardon. Your shirt's fixed and your shoes, Mr. John. Will you bathe, too?"

John's smiling eyes directed themselves toward the door of his little bathroom, and he nodded.

"Great, big, white, splashy tub, and real towels an inch thick!" he mused aloud. "Yes, I think I will, just for the fun of the thing. You skip along, Barton. I'll attend to that, and—oh, by the way! Just forget that I'm here, will you? Want to surprise the girls at luncheon, you know. Lay the extra place, and say nothing," concluded young Mr. Valmer, and just caught himself as he was about to slap the swiftly departing shoulder of his uncle's butler.

Following this, John turned on the hot water and devoted a brief space to pleasant meditation.

His uncle was really pleased with his rather suddenly reached decision to return, wasn't he? A good old chap, his uncle—the best that ever lived. Odd in some ways, given to fits of temper, wherein he was all but impossible, and enough to drive a dozen nephews from the house; but a good old chap, all the same, Uncle Steve!

Barton seemed to be getting old; natural enough, of course, but he didn't look any older. It was mental, not physical. Why, three years ago, when any uninteresting nonentity was staying at the house, the butler had cornered one, on the slightest provocation, to relate how the James Brown branch of the family had married into the Casslings of Baltimore, while the William Brown element was allied with the Filman family of Portsmouth, the second son of James having married the eldest daughter of Pottswood Cassling, while the eldest daughter of William, by his first wife—and all that sort of silly rot. And yet upon this, the first occasion of John's asking a question about a guest, Barton's spring of information had gone dry.

Towels! Say! They *were* towels, were they not? No towel of that character had touched John's skin in three years!

Later, having arrayed himself with a care quite foreign to any of his dressing in the same three years, young Mr. Valmer rolled his big chair over to the open window, found his supply of cigarettes—which were the cheapest variety, and would have to be replaced this afternoon with a brand a bit more fitting—disposed his well shod feet upon a stool, and sighed luxuriously. One more hour, and luncheon would be served! John chuckled and reached for the matches.

Ina's familiar voice in the corridor roused him at last. Ina was going down now, and, unless habits had changed, Edith, if at home, would follow in another five or ten minutes. Oh, yes, there was the voice of Edith's more or less esteemed consort now, and it hadn't changed at all. Well, let 'em all get down and reach the stage of asking the reason for the empty extra chair!

John left off his chuckling and laughed outright, long and almost foolishly. Rarely in recent years had he grown playful, but the mood was upon him now. The family, doubtless, would exclaim at the sight of him; but watching Mary Allers's expression was going to be rather well worth while!

In all probability, since a very new friend would hardly be making an extended visit, she had heard of the Valmer nephew. Almost certainly, however, she knew nothing of his shameful dereliction, for that, as John chanced to know, was a family skeleton quite carefully guarded; but she did know Jim Hammond, the honest workingman. When Jim Hammond loitered into the Valmer dining room and took his place, perhaps even beside her—John laughed again!

If he chose to linger here much longer with his idiotic giggling, luncheon would be over and the point of his joke a trifle dulled. Young Mr. Valmer arose, examined himself in the mirror, and then sauntered down the stairway.

They were already seated. John subdued his grin and entered, just as he had entered in the old days, just as if he had never missed one of them — entered and looked around and failed to grin as he had intended. Mr. Dinsmore, glancing up, said:

"Ha! How-de-do, Jack?"

"Hello, Wells!" young Mr. Valmer replied, rather absently. "Hello, Ina!"

Ina nodded.

"Stopping over for luncheon, Johnny? That's nice," she observed, without any hysterical enthusiasm.

Her elder sister also nodded, and went on with something she had been saying to her husband.

"I'm home for good," John stated.

"Oh, that's even nicer!" said Ina. "Did they—er—fire you, Jack?"

"No, I—I left of my own accord." Young Mr. Valmer grinned faintly, as he settled in his place and glanced at the empty chair beside him. "Somebody missing from the family circle?"

Stephen was looking directly at his younger daughter.

"Oh, yes, we have a guest—Mary Allers," she said.

"Do I know her?" John Valmer queried innocently.

"Not yet. You will presently," Ina said.

"And when you do, John, you'll know an exceptionally fine young woman!" Stephen added, with some emphasis.

"She must be that, sir, if you commend her," said John. "I remember that you failed to approve of most—"

"Father hasn't changed any," Edith remarked. "Mary's the lucky exception."

And now they were talking about some unimportant golf matter again—or the sisters and Dinsmore were, at all events. As Barton removed dishes and put on other dishes, and the meal approached its end, Stephen's glance strayed repeatedly toward the empty chair, until—

"Where *is* Mary?" he inquired, suddenly and with emphasis.

Only silence greeted him.

"Not ill, is she?"

"She's not in her room, father," Ina answered. "The door was open when I came down."

"Oh, she's probably galloping along forty or fifty miles from here," Mr. Dinsmore submitted. "Lost all track of time, no doubt. Mary's strong for the horseback stuff."

"She can't have taken a tumble, can she?" Edith asked sharply.

"Well, that's a pleasant possibility," Stephen said. "No, hardly. Somebody'd have telephoned in, if anything of that kind had happened. Barton, did Miss Allers ride this morning?"

"I couldn't say, sir."

"She's not at home?"

"I haven't seen her, sir."

"Well, find out from the stable, Barton. If she isn't riding, find Miss Allers and say that luncheon has been served for some time."

The meal went on, quite as if nothing disturbing was afoot, quite as if no empty chair yawned at the younger Mr. Valmer's elbow. The meal, in fact, had reached its end before Barton reappeared.

"Miss Allers didn't ride, sir, and she's not in the house," he reported.

Stephen peered sharply at him.

"Look around the grounds, Barton."

"I've had Jenkins do that, sir," the butler responded. "Miss Allers isn't in the grounds, either, Mr. Valmer."

(To be continued in the November number of MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE*)*

POPPIES OF OBLIVION

My heart is a poppy-thick garden—
  Nothing but graves, nothing but graves;
I plant there the violets of pardon,
  The balms of regret, and there waves
Oblivion of grasses that sigh
That love can but die.

Oh, headstones of names that did love me,
  Of names once alive in the light!
Till the nettles shall prosper above me
  I shall say them alone in the night;
Remembrance of each I shall keep,
Till I, too, must sleep.

Oliver C. Moore

Out of the Woods

THE STORY OF AN ARTLESS GIRL, A HUNGRY WOLF, AND A WONDERFUL GRANDMOTHER

By Elisabeth Sanxay Holding

WHEN you learn that this story begins with the heroine setting off through the woods to visit her grandmother, who was ill, you may guess that it is the familiar tale of *Little Red Riding Hood.* I must admit that that is what it is, and I warn you that you may count upon a very artless little heroine and a wolf of insinuating manners and glib tongue; but *this* grandmother will not be eaten up.

Nor did Ethel carry a basket containing a little pat of butter and a cake. She had, instead, a large and luxurious box of candied fruit under her arm; and instead of singing through the woods, she wore a sulky and miserable expression. Unfortunately red hoods are not in vogue, for such a thing would have been notably becoming to her little gypsy face. However, she was young enough and lovely enough to look well in anything, even a sulky expression.

She was not without some excuse for her discontented air. Ethel was one of those unfortunate little bones of contention so often to be found in divided families, and she had been so much disputed over and argued about, and so rarely consulted or even questioned, that she had grown to think of herself as a helpless pawn in an incomprehensible game, where she could never win anything.

The disputes had begun long before she was born. Her father's family had that pride of newly acquired wealth beside which pride of ancestry shrinks to nothing. Indeed, to spring from splendid ancestors may often make one feel a little humble, but to feel that one is vastly more important than any of one's forbears makes for arrogance.

The Taylors had objected very much to the marriage of their only son. Even when the marriage was made, and there was no earthly use in objecting, they kept on, in a very unpleasant way. All the misfortunes which the young man brought upon his wife and child by his recklessness and folly only increased their anger against the victims; and when he died, they all came forward with helpful suggestions as to what he should have done when he was alive.

Ethel had been a small girl of nine then, and not yet looked upon as guilty; but when she refused to leave her mother and take advantage of the offers made by several of the Taylors, she lost their sympathy. Her mother, with criminal selfishness, hadn't made the least attempt to persuade her child to leave her. On the contrary, she had gone back to her own people, and had lived with them in quiet contentment.

It was to these people of hers that the Taylors so strongly objected. She herself was a quiet and inoffensive creature who gave little trouble, but her parents were Italians, and poor, and not ashamed of either of the two things.

Dr. Mazetti had been professor of romance languages in a small Western college, but he had become so absorbed in the enormous commentary upon Dante which he was writing that he found his teaching very much in the way; so he gave up his chair. Mrs. Taylor, the paternal grandmother, had spoken about this.

"Of course," she had said, not very pleasantly, "it's a good thing to have faith in your husband's work; but suppose it's *not* a financial success?"

"We don't expect it to be," replied Mrs. Mazetti, in her excellent English. "Such work as that is not undertaken for money."

"Do you mean to say that you'll permit your husband to give up his—" began Mrs. Taylor, but the other interrupted her.

" A *man* does not ask the permission of others to do what he thinks best," she said quietly. " I should be ashamed of myself if I were even to suggest that he should sacrifice his life's work on my account."

" What about yourself? Aren't you sacrificing—"

" I sacrifice nothing," said Mrs. Mazetti. " I am very, very happy and proud."

And so she was, and so was her only child until she married young Taylor; and so she was again when she came home with the little Ethel, to live with those simple, gentle people once more. Not for long, however, for she died some two years later.

Then the arguments and disputes began again, and this time the Taylors won. Children of eleven are pitifully easy to bribe, and while Ethel was still dazed and stricken after the loss of her mother, all these relations competed for her favor. She was petted and pampered as she had never been before in her life.

It is regrettable to admit that she liked all this, liked the toys and the pretty clothes and the indulgence better than the benign and quiet régime of her grandfather Mazetti, who believed that children should be literally " brought up " to the level of the wiser and more experienced adults about them, instead of bringing a whole household down to childish standards. He was always very patient and gentle, but he was too fond of talking about Dante, and of relating anecdotes about an Italian poet who insisted upon being tied into his chair, so that he couldn't run away from his studies.

Moreover, old Dr. Mazetti had no money to spend upon toys and clothes. The Taylors took no interest in Dante or any other poet, but they took Ethel to the circus; so she said she wanted to live with Aunt Amy, her father's sister.

She wasn't aware, at the time, how terribly she had hurt the Mazettis. They said very little. Indeed, they discussed it in private, and decided that it was their duty to say very little. Aunt Amy could give Ethel material benefits which they could not give; and if the child preferred that sort of thing, it was, after all, neither unnatural nor unexpected.

" Each must find his own," said Dr. Mazetti. " What is joy for one is a burden for another."

So they let her go, and they did it beautifully, without saddening her little heart with reproaches or tears. She came back to visit them once a month or so, but somehow, in her new existence, this quiet old couple had begun to seem very foreign, very unreal.

She was abroad with her aunt when Dr. Mazetti died. Though she grieved for him honestly, she was too young and too busy to nourish any sorrow long.

II

When Ethel Taylor came home, at nineteen, her grandmother seemed like a little ghost from the past, utterly unconnected with her present life. She still went to visit the old lady, and sat in the familiar room in her little cottage, where the bronze bust of Dante appeared to impose a dignified calm; but these visits were nothing but interludes to real life, and real life, just now, was a miserable thing.

The trouble was that Aunt Amy kept on being Aunt Amy, while the childish Ethel and the nineteen-year-old one were entirely different persons. Aunt Amy wanted her to come out, and to be a nice, happy débutante like other girls; but something in Ethel's blood rebelled against that. She called it a " modern spirit," and never realized that instead of being modern, it was the old Mazetti strain, come down to her from people who for generations had not lived by bread alone.

She told her aunt that she wanted to be a singer.

" That's a charming accomplishment," said Aunt Amy affably.

" I mean I want really to study — for years and years!"

" Certainly, dear, if you can find the time."

" Time!" said Ethel. " What else do I ever do but waste time?"

" Naturally you can't neglect your social duties—"

" Duties!"

" Please don't repeat my words in that odd way," said Aunt Amy, a little hurt. " If you want to study singing, there's no reason why you shouldn't, so long as you're not excessive about it."

" But I want to be excessive! I want to give all my time to it! I want to be a professional singer!"

Aunt Amy laughed, not in order to be irritating, but because she really thought it was funny. Not being a woman of much penetration, she told some of her friends about that absurd little Ethel's fantastic idea.

As a result, the girl was teased about it. Ethel couldn't endure being teased. She had that queer lack of self-confidence, combined with tremendous resolution and a little vanity, that belong to young artists, and she felt that she was absurd, although she really knew that she wasn't. She was ashamed to practice now, and at the same time she exulted in her clear, strong, flexible voice. When she was asked to sing, she refused; yet sometimes, when she knew there were people in the drawing-room, she would go up the stairs or through the hall, singing her loudest and sweetest, half terrified, half delighted, at the glorious flood of melody that rose from her heart.

She didn't want anything else. She couldn't and wouldn't be bothered with "social duties." She wanted to work hard, all day and every day, until she was mistress of this great gift of hers, until she could sing in reality as she did in imagination. She had fits of black depression, when the sounds that came from her throat seemed a mockery of what she intended. At other moments she was in wild spirits, because she was sure she had made a little progress.

Her changing humors were so marked that Aunt Amy was gravely perturbed. She felt that Ethel was becoming "eccentric," which was the worst thing any one could be, and she attributed it all to this annoying obsession with singing. In all good faith, she did what she thought best for the girl—she stopped her lessons.

Ethel wept and stormed and entreated and argued until she was almost ill, but without moving Aunt Amy.

"No!" that lady said firmly. "If you'll put all that nonsense out of your head, and lead a normal, sensible life like other girls, I'll let you take up singing again in a year."

She hoped and believed that within a year's time such a pretty and delightful girl would surely find something better to think about.

Ethel was helpless. She was exquisitely dressed, and she lived in great comfort and luxury, but she hadn't a penny of her own to pay for lessons.

Artists, however—even young and undeveloped ones—are very hard to deal with, because they will not give up and be sensible. Instead of resigning herself to doing without what she wanted, Ethel did nothing but think how she could get at least a part of it. Being nineteen, and rash, and terribly in earnest, she was dallying with a singularly unsuitable idea.

III

"Hello, Lad!" she said, not at all surprised, and apparently not very much pleased, at the sudden appearance of a young man on that quiet path through the woods.

"Hello, Ethel!" he returned, and fell into step beside her.

She didn't trouble to glance at her companion. She knew exactly how he looked, anyhow. He was slender and supple and dark, and handsome in his way—which was not her way.

There were times when the sleekness of his hair and the brightness of his smile and the extreme fastidiousness of his clothes exasperated her. There were other times when his talk about music made her see in him the one sympathetic, understanding person on earth. He had learned to read the signs, and to tell which sort of time it was; and he fancied that this was a favorable moment.

"Have you been thinking—" he began softly.

"Naturally," said she. "I suppose every one does, once in a while."

Young Ladislaw Metz was not easily discouraged. He, too, was an artist.

"Do you mind my walking with you, Ethel?" he asked patiently. "I came all the way out from the city on the chance of meeting you here, because I had something special to tell you."

She thought she knew what he meant, and frowned; but when he began to speak, the frown vanished, and she sat down on the grass to listen.

Old Mrs. Mazetti was waiting and waiting in her chair by the window. All the bright spring afternoon had passed. The sky was blue no more, but faint and mournful as the sun went down. Outside, the light lingered, but in the room it was dark—very dark, very quiet. Ethel had written to say that she would come early, and for hours the old lady had been watching the road along which her granddaughter must come. It always made her uneasy to think of a girl as young and pretty as Ethel traveling alone.

This was one of the very few ideas that

Aunt Amy shared with Mrs. Mazetti. Aunt Amy wanted Ethel to go properly in a motor car, but her niece was so obstinately set on going by train that she had yielded. After all, it was such a trifling matter—an hour's journey to a suburb, to visit a grandmother. The good lady never so much as imagined the existence of Ladislaw Metz, or any one like him.

But old Mrs. Mazetti did. Not that she knew anything of this particular young man, but she had had opportunity, in her long life, to observe that in such cases there generally was a young man. When Ethel began taking more and more time between the station and the house, the old lady grew more and more sure, and more distressed.

She said nothing, however, because her grandchild showed no disposition to confide in her, and she knew that more harm than good would result from asking questions. She couldn't get near to Ethel. She had tried time after time, with all her quiet subtlety, to bring about a greater intimacy, to show how steadfast and profound was her sympathy; but Ethel never saw.

In fact, Ethel didn't know that she needed sympathy. She thought that all she wanted was to be let alone. Without in the least meaning to be unkind, she ignored the invaluable love that would so greatly have helped her.

For the third time the servant came in to light the lamp, and this time Mrs. Mazetti permitted it. She had given up expecting Ethel for that day.

"She has forgotten," she thought.

In spite of her bitter disappointment, she could still smile a little over the girl's careless youth. The sun had vanished now, and a strange yellow twilight lay over the earth like a sulphurous mist. It was a melancholy hour. The brightness of the little room made the outside world more forlorn and dim by contrast.

Mrs. Mazetti was about to turn away from the window with a sigh, when she caught sight of Ethel hurrying along the road—with a young man. The girl's companion left her when they were still some distance from the house. If the old lady hadn't had remarkably sharp eyes, she would never have seen him.

Ethel came in alone.

"Grandmother!" she said. "I'm awfully ashamed of myself for being so late!"

She really was ashamed and sorry, but it was not her nature to invent excuses, and she had no intention of explaining. Mrs. Mazetti saw all this perfectly, and did not fail to note something defiant in her grandchild's expression. Nevertheless, she meant to come to the point this time.

"You were with a friend?" she asked mildly.

"Yes, grandmother."

"Your Aunt Amy knows this friend?"

Ethel tried to imitate that tranquil, affectionate tone.

"No, grandmother, she doesn't. He's just a boy I met at the studio where I used to take singing lessons."

"And you think she would not care for him?"

"I know she wouldn't," Ethel answered candidly. "I don't care for him so very much myself; but we're interested in the same things, and nobody else is."

"In music?"

"Yes. He's—" Ethel began, but she stopped.

What was the use of going on, and being told again how absurd she was? Mrs. Mazetti was silent, too, but not because she felt discouraged. She was thinking, trying to understand.

"You are still always thinking of the singing?" she asked softly.

Ethel's face flushed, and her young mouth set in a harsh line.

"I'm not going to listen to any more lectures," she thought. "No one understands. No one ever will!"

"This young man is a musician?" her grandmother asked.

"Yes, in a way," said Ethel. "Isn't the country pretty at this time of the year, grandmother?"

The old lady looked out of the window at the rapidly darkening sky, against which the trees stood out as black as ink. It seemed to her not at all pretty now, but vast and terrible.

"My little Ethel!" she thought. "My little bird, who longs to sing! What is this going on now, poor foolish little one? What am I to do?"

She missed her husband acutely. She missed him always, but more than ever at this instant. Ethel would have listened to him, for every one did. Quiet and tranquil as he was, there had been an air of authority about him that she had never seen disregarded.

Ethel was very still. The lamp threw a

clear light on her warm, vivid young face, downcast and plainly unhappy.

"If I spoke to your Aunt Amy about those lessons?" suggested the old lady.

"It wouldn't do the least bit of good, grandmother. I've said everything there is to be said; and—anyhow, I don't care now."

"Why not, Ethel? Why not now?"

"Oh, I don't know!" Ethel replied airily. "Let's not talk about it, grandmother. I've brought some candied fruit. You like that, don't you?"

The old lady untied the flamboyant package with fingers that were not very steady. While she was doing so, the clock struck six.

"I'll have to go," said Ethel quickly. "I'm sorry I came so late and had such a tiny visit, grandmother, but—"

"Wait, my little Ethel. Gianetta will order a taxi."

"Oh, no, thanks!" said Ethel. "I like the walk."

"Not now, in the dark, my dear."

"I don't mind the dark. It's really not at all late. I'll—"

"No!" said the old lady with unexpected firmness. "There must be a taxi, and Gianetta will go with you to the train."

Ethel answered politely, but with equal firmness, that she didn't want that.

"Come here, my little Ethel!" said her grandmother. When the girl stood before her, she took both of her hands. "This friend — this young man — is waiting for you?"

Ethel flushed, but she answered with the fine honesty that had been hers all her life.

"Yes!" she said, in just the sturdy, defiant tone she used to confess a piece of childish mischief years and years ago.

"You see me here," said Mrs. Mazetti, "unable even to rise from my chair. I could do nothing to stop you, if I wished. I do not wish, because I trust you; only I ask you to tell me a little."

Ethel was more moved than she wished to be. She bent to kiss the soft white hair.

"I'd rather not, please!" she said.

"If you will remember, my little Ethel, that your mother always came to me, always told me what troubled her! I am very old. I have learned very much, seen very much. I could help you."

"But you wouldn't, grandmother. You wouldn't like my—plan."

"Then perhaps I could make a better one."

Mrs. Mazetti felt the girl's warm hands tremble, and saw her lip quiver. She waited, terribly anxious.

"You see," said Ethel, "all I care about is being able to sing. Nobody believes that. No one understands except Ladislaw!"

"That is the young man?"

"Yes — Ladislaw Metz," said Ethel, a little impatient at this interest in the least important part of her story. "He knows what it means to me."

"What is he? He sings?"

"He's a barytone. He's going to be a wonderful singer some day."

"But now? What is he now?"

"Well, you see, he's poor, and he can't afford to go on studying just now. So—I don't like to tell you, because you'll think he's not really a musician — he's on the stage."

"Ah!" said the old lady, with perfect composure. "The theater? An operetta?"

"Well, no—it's vaudeville. He's been singing awful, cheap, popular songs, just to keep himself alive. Now he wants a partner for a better sort of turn—an act, you know. We should sing—"

"We?"

"He's going to give me a chance," said Ethel quietly. The old lady was silent for a moment.

"I should like to hear about it," she told the girl at last, in a voice that touched Ethel profoundly—a voice so determined to sound cheerful and sympathetic.

"I can't tell you, grandmother," she said gently; "because you'd think it was your duty to tell Aunt Amy, and she'd try to stop me. I don't intend to be stopped. I may never have another chance. I don't care what I have to sacrifice. I'd gladly give up anything on earth for my singing. You can't think what it's like to have that in you—such a terrible longing—to know that you *can* do it, and to be stopped and turned aside and laughed at!" She bent and kissed the old lady again. "I've got to go now, grandmother dear!" she said, with a sob.

"No! Little Ethel! No!"

"I've got to, grandmother. I promised."

"Ethel! You promised what?"

The girl was frankly crying now.

"Good-by, darling!" she said. "You've always been my dearest, kindest friend. If I hadn't been a little beast, I'd never have left you; but I am a little beast. I must go my own way. I've got to go. Good-by, dear!"

Her hand was on the door knob.

"No, Ethel, no!" cried the old lady.

With one backward glance, tearful, soft, but utterly resolute, the girl was gone.

"Gianetta!" called Mrs. Mazetti.

Gianetta came in from the kitchen with the querulous expression natural to her. She had been the old lady's servant for nearly twenty years. She adored her, and had never found her anything but just, kind, and generous. Nevertheless, Gianetta had a great many grievances, and did not keep them to herself.

"Telephone," said her mistress, "and order me a taxi."

"You? You a taxi?" cried Gianetta. "But that is mad!"

"Quick, Gianetta!"

"But you are very ill! With this rheumatism, you can't walk! How do you think then that you—"

"Quick, Gianetta!"

"Patience! Patience!" said Gianetta, in her most annoying tone. "I order this taxi, but you cannot get into it. It is only a waste of money. No matter—you are the mistress. I telephone!"

"Now!" said the old lady to herself. "I *must get up*. Leo always said that what one ought to do, one would find strength for. I must do this. For one minute more I shall sit quietly here, and then I shall rise and get myself ready."

She clasped her hands in her lap and laid her head against the back of the chair, looking out at the sky, now quite dark. Then, with a long sigh, she grasped the arms and slowly raised herself to her feet.

Gianetta, coming in again, gave a loud shriek.

"Silence, you foolish one," said the old lady. "Get me my cloak and hat."

IV

"I DON'T understand you," said Ladislaw, in a deeply injured voice. "You'll trust your whole life to me, and yet—"

The little wood was dark and unfamiliar, and he found it very disagreeable to hurry along at the pace she set.

"And yet you behave—" he went on.

"I'm not trusting my whole life to you," replied Ethel vehemently. "I'd be sorry to think there was notning better than that to trust in!"

"That's not quite the way to talk to the man you're going to marry, is it?" he asked. "I've always tried my best to do what you wanted. I don't see why you shouldn't trust me."

"I don't see, either, Lad," Ethel answered, with her discounting frankness. "Only somehow you seem so—so dreadfully strange to me. I never understand you. I know you must be fond of me, or you wouldn't have asked me to marry you; and I know it's a sensible, practical idea if we're going on tour. But I can't—I can't—" She choked down a sob. "I can't feel—friendly—with you!"

"I don't want you to. I want you to love me."

"But they ought to go together!" she cried. "I'm awfully grateful to you, and I love to hear you sing, but I'm afraid! Oh, it's not fair to you, because I know I'll never feel like that!"

"You will some day," he answered, with a patience that frightened her still more.

"I've got to be honest with you, Lad. I'm sure I shall never feel so. It's only because I want this chance so much—so much that I'd do almost anything to get it. I know that if I can once sing in public, I shall be all right, and—"

He laughed softly.

"It doesn't go so fast," he said. "Nothing does. You will have what every one else has—two failures for each triumph, two pains for every joy. You will have hard work, discouragement, anxiety, and a good many other troubles you've never thought of. That's why I ask you to marry me, because you need some one to protect you. If you don't love me, very well! I'll love you twice as much, to make up for it."

His hand fell lightly on her shoulder. She sprang aside hastily.

That did not offend him. He never seemed to be offended or impatient. He was always reasonable, kind, sympathetic; and yet, instead of being pleased or touched by this, Ethel found it disquieting and mysterious.

His polite endurance of her changing humors was more like that of indifference than that of love. Of course, he did love her. He must, and she was a very fortunate girl to have found, at the very beginning of her career, a man who loved her and who could and would help her so greatly.

This first venture was in itself a thing very displeasing to her. It was a vaudeville act of his own devising, in which, with several changes of costume, they would sing snatches from the most popular operas, all woven together to make a silly story. She tried to look beyond that, to the great triumphs of the future. She tried to feel that these triumphs would be ample compensation for the monstrous sacrifice she was making of her life.

Once in a while, in a brief flash, she half realized what she was doing. The memory of her mother came back to her—that gentle and quiet woman who had held so steadfastly to her own ideals.

No matter how ardent her desire for perfection in her beloved art, no matter how splendid her ambition, Ethel could not be rid of a secret and bitter sense of guilt. It was wrong—she knew it—it was wrong and unworthy to marry Ladislaw.

"But why?" she demanded of herself. "I don't care anything about love, and men, and things like that. Ladislaw knows it, and if he doesn't care, why should I? Anyhow, it's too late now. I've promised, and I'm going to keep my word. Mother would want me to do that. Oh, but if mother had been here, she would have understood! She would never have let me get into such a dreadful, miserable, heartbreaking situation! If she could come now, just for one little minute, just to say one word—"

But there was no one there except Ladislaw. The lights of the railway station gleamed before them, and he drew close to her.

"Give me one kiss, Ethel!" he said, very low.

She hated his voice, she hated to have him so near her, she hated herself. The little wood seemed like a black and sinister forest.

"No!" she said brusquely, as she had often spoken to him before.

This time he was not patient and humble. He caught her arm, and tried to draw her to him.

"You shan't treat me like a dog!" he muttered.

In growing alarm, she stared at him in the dark, and she fancied she saw his white teeth revealed by a wolfish grin. With a violent wrench, she freed herself. With the swiftness of terror, she ran out of that haunted wood into the safe, bright road before the station.

As she stood there, flushed and panting, trying to consider the situation, he came leisurely up to her.

"You can't go back now—not after that telegram you sent your aunt," he said. "There's nowhere for you to go, except with me. You haven't even your ticket or your purse. You gave them to me to keep —and I mean to keep them!"

"I don't care—I'll walk," she retorted, in a trembling voice.

"Walk where?" he inquired. "You told your aunt you were going away to get married. You'll have hard work explaining that you changed your mind; and you'll have hard work getting home at all without a penny. Come! Here's the train. Don't be a little fool!"

The long, mournful hoot of the approaching engine came to her ears.

"Oh, give me my purse!" she cried in terror and despair. "Oh, please! Oh, please, Ladislaw!"

"I won't," he said. "If you won't come with me, I'll leave you here alone. You'll be sorry, Ethel. You'll lose your chance to be a singer, and you'll lose more than that. Your aunt won't take this very well."

She looked around in anguish. The ticket office was closed for the night, and there were only strangers on the platform. All about that little lighted oasis were the woods and fields and tiny distant houses, filled with more strangers.

V

"ETHEL!" cried a voice.

It was the voice of the one person who would understand and help and solace her —a voice she could never hear again in this world, strong, tender, and clear.

"Oh, mother!" she cried.

"Ethel!"

It came again, and not the voice of a spirit, but real, and close at hand.

"It's some one in that taxi," whispered Ladislaw. "Better not answer."

"But it's grandmother!" said Ethel, astounded.

She flew to the old lady like a stone from a catapult.

"Grandmother, what *are* you doing here?" she demanded, wild with delight and relief.

"Nothing!" replied the old lady serenely. "Present your friend to me."

"I—" began Ethel.

Ladislaw was already there, hat in hand.

"Mr. Metz, grandmother," she said.

"Ah! Mr. Metz!" the old lady repeated, looking thoughtfully at him. Her calm old eyes seemed terrible to him. "Are you leaving?" she asked.

He hesitated for a moment. Then he remembered that Ethel had never seemed to regard her grandmother as especially important. She was old, and poor, and obscure; what harm could she do?

"Yes," he said. "Ethel and I are going to be married. She's already sent a telegram to her aunt in the city, to tell her."

"You are a rash young man," said the old lady, in a tone almost friendly.

"Rash?" he repeated, with a faint frown.

"Very!" said she. "It is a surprise to me, because I see that you are not American. Americans marry that way—for love; but with the people of Europe, it is often different. They think of how they shall live. They wish a dot—a dowry—something more than love. It is very beautiful, this; because the poor little Ethel will never have anything."

Metz was too much taken aback to be discreet.

"But she will!" he said. "Her aunt will—"

"Her aunt has only the income of an estate. She leaves nothing to Ethel; and certainly she *gives* nothing to Ethel when she is the wife of Mr. Metz."

"But I thought—" he began.

Suddenly the frail little old creature blazed into magnificent wrath.

"Be off!" she cried, raising her hand in a threatening gesture. "Away with you, miserable, beggarly fortune hunter! Wolf! *Bestia!* Be off!"

He started back. She leaned out of the window, her voice wonderfully strong and vigorous for her years. As he retreated, even above the roar of the incoming train, he heard her only too plainly, and was aware that other people heard her, too.

"Beggarly fortune hunter! Wolf! *Bestia!* Away with you!"

He was glad to climb on board.

The taxi went hastening back along the dark, still roads, and the old lady held the sobbing Ethel tight in her arms.

"But what is there to cry about?" she asked, in tears herself. "Foolish little one! You shall stay with me, my little bird, until you are ready to fly away. There was something put by for you to have—later. You shall have it now, for the singing lessons. Why do you cry, then? You shall sing, I tell you!"

Ethel was silent for a time.

"Grandmother!" she said. "The first time you called me—it sounded—I thought it was—mother!"

The old lady's arm tightened about her.

"It is the same voice," she said.

INVOCATION

Horace, Book I, Ode xxx

Royal Venus, Cyprus green,
Cnidus, Paphos, claim thee queen;
But thy favored isle leave thou—
Glycera implores thee now!

Incense here she offers thee,
Prays to thee on bended knee,
Flings her temple doors apart—
Temple of her maiden's heart!

Enter! Make that heart thy home,
And with thee let Cupid come;
Ah, yes, bring thy glowing boy—
He will fill her heart with joy!

Let the Nymphs and Graces, too,
Girdles loosened, come with you,
And bring Mercury! In truth,
Without Venus, what were youth?

Roselle Mercier Montgomery

The Forty-Eighth Adventure

THE MOST EXCITING EPISODE IN THE CAREER OF JAMES TIMPKINS, BOOKKEEPER AND STUDENT OF METROPOLITAN LIFE

By Robert J. Horton

THE executive and office force of Cartweight, Sills & Co., wholesale linens, boasted a rather brilliant personnel. There was Mr. Horace Cartweight himself as an instance. He was a large man, florid, with iron-gray hair and bushy black brows, from under which he frequently glared fiercely at his underlings. He always wore a gray suit with a bold display of white handkerchief in the bosom pocket.

There was Mr. George Sills. He was a tall and distinguished figure, regularly attired in a dark, double-breasted coat, offset by a cravat of daring color or pattern. He ran to wearing white carnations in his buttonhole.

The other member of the firm, Mr. Morgan, was a dapper individual with one of those mustaches originally imported from abroad, and a penchant for tweeds and sport suits.

Even Mr. Behr, the cashier, had something of the atmosphere of a Long Branch week-end party about him. He belonged to an exclusive golf club, and he acquired an accent about the time he made his first score of ninety. This accent was very much respected by the office workers, and had even impressed Mr. Cartweight, who had concealed his interest by heavy frowns.

Now it can readily be perceived that with such an illustrious quartet of higher-ups setting such a transcendent example, the remaining members of the office force, to the best of their various tastes and incomes, followed the lead of their chiefs. As a result, the office of Cartweight, Sills & Co., was, in a way, smart. The firm did a good business.

Curious as it may appear to some, none of the individuals so far mentioned is the principal character of this narrative. Indeed, if one had gone into the offices of the Cartweight concern, the last person he would have thought of as being at all likely to prove interesting would have been James Timpkins.

In all that sea of color Mr. Timpkins was the one drab spot. His hair was graying rapidly. He was small in stature, and, in the opinion of some of his fellow bookkeepers, small in other ways. He was not above having his shoes half-soled twice, and the uppers sewed. He was not particular as to the crease in his trousers, or as to the wear they showed.

On the other hand, he was very particular as to his figures and their accuracy. Perhaps the reason why he had remained a bookkeeper in that concern for something like twenty years lay in the fact that he was a slave to detail. He was a conscientious, dependable, faithful cog in the office machinery of Cartweight, Sills & Co., and he was paid as such.

They tolerated him as " old Jim "—and " tolerated " is the word.

" Poor old Jim! " they would say. " Little he gets out of life! "

And that's as much as they knew.

For while the members of the firm played with their business, their country homes, and their motors; while the cashier played at his golf and practiced his accent; while the others played with their hobby of keeping up the best appearance possible, James Timpkins had the greatest plaything of all.

Old Jim played with the city of New York.

His work he took for granted. He enjoyed it, and he did it well. He accepted the stern domination of his landlady, Mrs. Lavina Sterns, with his customary meekness. He did not attempt to change his simple mode of life, even though he had a neat sum in a savings account. He patronized dairy lunches cheerfully, and never once complained of Mrs. Sterns's hard floors, hard bed, or hard fare. He was by way of being the prey of imposition.

But when his day's work was over, when he had swung uptown on a subway strap and consumed Mrs. Sterns's dinner, when he had climbed the two flights to his modest rear room, sidled in, and closed the door, then Mr. Timpkins was a new and different man.

His blue eyes would sparkle as he polished his glasses. His ruddy face would glow as he dressed and prepared for the street.

For the streets of Gotham—the ill-smelling, crowded thoroughfares of the lower East Side, the quiet residential streets, the glittering avenues, and the little islands of parks from the Battery to Morningside—all were his when his hours were his own. The city's life and movement were the very heart's blood in his veins.

"Old Jim" Timpkins—oh, no one would have believed it!—was an adventurer and a seeker of romance.

Here we come to Mr. Timpkins's most valued possession. His bank deposit? His position? His reputation? *Never!* Mr. Timpkins's one real treasure was a notebook of ample size, bound in red leather.

While he is away at the office, let us steal into his room, reach far down into his trunk—ignoring the double lock which so much irritated Mrs. Sterns—take the notebook out, and peep into it.

The first page is inscribed:

MY ADVENTURES

Turn the page. There!

No. 1—The Adventure of the Young Man Who Wanted Car Fare Home to Philadelphia.

That had been years before, and it was not until the young man approached Mr. Timpkins a second time that he discovered that his philanthropy had been misplaced.

But no matter—it had started his series of adventures.

A few pages further:

No. 14—The Adventure of the Old Lady Who Fell on Fourteenth Street.

If Timpkins hadn't been on the streets that night, he wouldn't have been there to help her up, to gather her packages, to see her to her car. He wouldn't have had the memory of the grateful smile she had bestowed upon him as a reward. An incident to some, it was a pleasing adventure for Timpkins.

Still again:

No. 36—The Adventure of the Drunken Sailor in Bryant Park Who Told Me of a Man He Once Killed.

Timpkins had listened in awe and wonder and trembling. He was a peaceful, law-abiding man; but for two intoxicated hours he had sailed the seven seas with that swashbuckler of the bounding main. It was one of a hundred strange tales his city of Manhattan had told him on her streets. He had taken three nights to put it down in his adventure book.

There you have Mr. Timpkins's secret. He went out into the city, of nights and Sundays and holidays, seeking adventures—and he found them. They were adventures which would seem tame to some, of course, but not to him. He *understood* them. He took pleasure, too, in writing them down, in keeping a neat record.

Alas, as we glance through the book, we find no adventures of the heart! Mr. Timpkins was not a ladies' man. He had—purely by chance, perhaps—been singularly free of love affairs.

True, he had often paused at his window when he saw the nice-looking lady in the second-floor rear across the way. Once or twice, when he had been pottering with the flowers in the box under his window, and she had been hanging out some kind of a large green bird in a cage outside her window they had waved; but those could hardly be called adventures. He knew that she lived alone, and that she was very pleasant-looking; but that was all.

In the years since he had been keeping his record, Mr. Timpkins had had exactly forty-seven adventures which he had considered worthy of inscribing in his book.

On an afternoon in early autumn he shed his office coat in keen anticipation. The tang of approaching winter was in the air. The parks were flaunting those marvelous colors with which nature atones for her annual season of bleakness. The blood was stirring in his veins, and he knew it must be stirring in the veins of others.

It was a good season for adventures.

That very night might provide the material for No. 48.

Among other things, Mr. Timpkins was an optimist.

II

FATE deals out some queer mixtures—usually at times when we want straight potions.

When Mr. Timpkins reached his room that evening, he was in unusually good spirits. It still was light, and he walked to the window and opened it wide. The crisp, cool air invigorated him. He looked about his small domain with beaming features. There was nothing of old Jim, the office slave, about him now. He was the ruler of—

His features fell. Gloom succeeded surprise. He stared at the chair beside his table. This chair should have been a morris chair. There had been a morris chair in this room when he had taken it five years before. He had become used to it. It had, in fact, become a part of his domestic life—a big part. It was in the morris chair that he had sat and written his experiences in his adventure book under the glow of his table lamp. Now it had been replaced by a common rocking-chair, and not a very comfortable one, at that!

Doubtless Mrs. Sterns had thought she could rent her vacant second front more speedily if it contained such a comfortable chair as his had been; so she had imposed upon him again.

He had been there so long, had made such an ideal boarder, that she doubtless assumed he was a fixture.

Timpkins was as near being downright mad as he ever had been in his life. He decided to go to Mrs. Sterns, and demand that his chair be returned at once, or he would quit the place.

But he didn't. Mr. Timpkins often thought of asserting his rights, but he never acted on the impulse. It didn't seem to be in him—that's all.

He looked wistfully out of the window, toward the window across the way, and then turned to his dressing. Was the change of chairs to be the adventure he had anticipated?

He descended the two flights of stairs far less cheerfully than he had gone up them; but, once on the streets, his spirits revived considerably.

He walked westward to Riverside Drive. The Jersey skies, across the river, were stained with sunset red. Lights were twinkling along the opposite shore. Many people were out, and Timpkins walked slowly northward until he had crossed the viaduct at One Hundred and Twenty-Fifth Street.

Twilight descended, drawing a purple veil across the Palisades. Night flung its velvet cloak over the city, held it for a space, and then lifted it, to show the high vault of the heavens blossoming into stars. The windows of the tall apartment houses glowed with light. The river moved slowly—a dark ribbon dancing with varicolored spangles. The breeze freshened, and so did the sounds.

Mr. Timpkins sat on a bench and listened understandingly to the wailing instrument of a belated organ grinder; to the sharp yelps of dogs tugging at restraining leashes; to the frank laughter of maids and youths; to the bits of conversation wafted to him from passing couples; to the purr of smooth-running motors.

"'S good for the birds! 'S good for the birds! Makes 'em sing! Makes 'em sing!"

Mr. Timpkins was startled. The voice had shrilled the queer message almost in his ears. He turned to see a short, thickset man hastily putting a black hood over a cage he held in his hand. This done, the man picked up a package he had put upon the bench, hurried across the driveway, and walked up a side street.

Mr. Timpkins rose immediately. He didn't know exactly why he followed the man with the cage and the package. He didn't stop to reason it out. It was one of those hunches which often led him into an adventure. His eyes were bright, his step elastic, his lips parted in excitement.

He saw the man ahead go up a short flight of steps into a brownstone house. Mr. Timpkins sighed. Here had been the promising start of an adventure, but the trail had ended in less than a block.

He slacked his pace, gazing idly about. A man was standing across the street, swinging a stick. Mr. Timpkins recollected that he had several times been upon the verge of buying a stick. It must be soothing to stand and swing a light malacca.

Just then he saw the man with the cage and package descending the steps a short distance ahead. Mr. Timpkins's heart bounded. He thrilled. There was the man again. Fate! The city's great god of coincidence was standing by him!

He followed casually as the man walked

on up the street, and saw him enter another house. That was peculiar!

He walked on in a casual manner to the corner, and lounged in the comparative shadow of the awning in front of a soft drink establishment. He kept an eye down the street.

Some time passed, and Mr. Timpkins again felt qualms of misgiving. Well, anyway, if the man did not appear again, it had been a peculiar experience. It must be remembered that Mr. Timpkins had a fair imagination.

He was about to turn back and resume his walk along the river when he saw the man with the cage and the package coming down the steps. He drew a deep breath of relief. He decided to make an adventure out of the experience by asking the man what he had meant by shouting:

" 'S good for the birds! Makes 'em sing!"

To his amazement, the man came directly toward him. Not only that, but when he reached a position directly in front of Mr. Timpkins, he stopped abruptly and closed in on him.

" Here! Take these an' hold 'em a minute till I get back."

The man thrust the cage and the package into Mr. Timpkins's hands. Timpkins was too much amazed not to take them. He gasped with astonishment as the fingers of one hand closed over the handle of the bird cage, and the fingers of the other gripped the handle of the package.

" What—what—say—"

But the man had hurried around the corner and was out of sight.

Mr. Timpkins's eyes bulged as he looked down at the unwieldy cage, covered with its black hood, and the bulky package that he held in his other hand.

III

For some minutes Mr. Timpkins stood, holding his absurd burden, and striving to figure it all out. He concluded that the short man had had some important and imperative errand, and had meant to leave his property with him until he had attended to this pressing business. He decided to await the stranger's return.

So he stood quietly, just out of the glare of the lights of the refreshment emporium, and waited.

Five minutes passed—ten—a quarter of an hour.

Mr. Timpkins began to fidget. His position was a peculiar one. Here he was standing, holding in each hand something which did not belong to him, waiting, he did not know why, for some one whom he did not know.

He began to feel irritated. He was not a checking station! Why should a stranger run up to him and expect him to render a service of such an unusual nature on such short notice? Why, it was preposterous! His part in the affair was lacking in dignity. And yet—well, whatever the outcome of the business, it certainly was something to put down in the adventure book.

Having thus reasoned in extenuation, he continued to wait until half an hour had passed. By this time he was looking this way and that, and frowning. He put his burdens down on the walk and polished his glasses. He stepped to the corner and peered up and down the street.

He returned to his cage and package—or, rather, to the cage and package which had been intrusted to him. He decided to investigate. If the man who had left the things with him did not want them investigated, he should have taken better care of them. He had no business to impose on Timpkins, in the first place. It was a queer proceeding at best.

Mr. Timpkins stepped to the edge of the light with the cage, and lifted the hood. He saw a large, beautifully colored bird.

" 'S good for the birds! 'S good for the birds! Makes 'em sing! Makes 'em—"

Mr. Timpkins hastily dropped the hood over the cage. He looked quickly about with a startled gaze as the shrill voice died away.

So it had been the man's parrot that had shrieked into his ears! But what had the man been doing with a parrot, and why should he intrust the bird to the keeping of a total stranger, no matter how pressing his business elsewhere might be? Perhaps he wished to sell the parrot. Perhaps he was taking it from house to house in an effort to find a purchaser.

Mr. Timpkins was nettled. He could see no reason why he should continue to stand there indefinitely, waiting for the rightful owner of the bird and the package to show up.

He thought of inspecting the package, which was secured with a shawl strap, but immediately gave up the idea. After all, he was not particularly concerned with either the parrot or the package. He decided to make an effort to find their owner. If he was unsuccessful, he would turn the property over to the police or—or somebody. Mr. Timpkins was a little confused on this point.

Carrying the cage and package, he rounded the corner and started up the street in the direction which he thought the man had taken. He looked into the refreshment place, a cigar store, and several shops, without seeing a sign of him. In the middle of the block it occurred to Mr. Timpkins that the man's own parrot might be the best means of attracting his attention, if he was anywhere near.

He noted that there were few pedestrians in his immediate vicinity. Then, acting on impulse, he lifted the hood on the cage.

" 'S good for the birds! Makes 'em sing!"

Mr. Timpkins dropped the hood with something of a thrill. Evidently the parrot had been trained to cry out that message when the hood was lifted and it could see the light.

This certainly was a novel adventure! It was the queerest adventure he ever had had.

He looked about, but the owner of the bird failed to appear. Such pedestrians as had heard seemed but mildly interested. Mr. Timpkins looked up at the windows of the apartments over the shops. Probably the man was in one of these. He would take one more chance. There was no one near him, and the policeman on the other side of the street was walking with his back toward Timpkins.

Again he lifted the hood.

" Makes 'em sing!" shrilled the parrot. " To hell with the police!"

Mr. Timpkins dropped the hood like a plummet. He gasped, and his eyes bulged, as he saw the policeman across the street whirl about. Then he started rapidly back down the street, carrying the cage and the package.

Now he resolved to get rid of his burdens as speedily as possible. Evidently the parrot's vocabulary was not entirely confined to that proclamation about something or other being good for birds and making them sing. It would seem that the bird had a distinct dislike for the minions of the law.

Mr. Timpkins hurried around the corner with a furtive look over his shoulder, and stopped where he had waited so long for the mysterious owner of the parrot.

Because of the bird's last exclamation, he had his doubts about turning it over to the police. If the hood was removed in the officer's presence, it was just possible that the parrot might voice another imprecation, which would not only irritate the representative of constituted authority, but might result in him, Timpkins, being looked upon with suspicion.

He decided to put cage and package down on the walk near the wall of the building, and leave them there.

But, as he started to do this, the germ of Mr. Timpkins's adventurous spirit bestirred itself. There was no gainsaying the fact that this was an adventure, and a remarkable one, at that. If he left the bird, it would be ended; but something told Mr. Timpkins that the incident would not end there—ought not to end there. He was loath to have it end there.

Besides, the man might return looking for his bird and package, and find them gone. More than likely, some one would make away with them. Then the man might advertise in the newspapers, and Mr. Timpkins would thus have an opportunity to return the man his property and to hear his story. That would be a more satisfactory ending to the adventure than to close it by abandoning the cage and the package.

Mr. Timpkins came to a sudden decision. He would take his charges home.

On his way down Riverside Drive, he thought he saw a man on a bench signal to him. He walked close to the bench, saw the man stare at him with a blank expression, decided that he had been mistaken, and went on. Twice again this peculiar thing happened. Mr. Timpkins felt that the adventure was getting on his nerves.

He hurried on to his boarding house, shifting the heavy package and the lighter cage from hand to hand. It was nearly ten o'clock, and he hoped that Mrs. Sterns would not be about to see him come in. He inserted his key and entered softly, setting the cage on the floor, and reaching back through the door for the package. Then he closed the door and stole up the stairs.

On the first landing he met his landlady.

" Good evening," he greeted breathlessly.

Mrs. Sterns lifted her thin brows.

" Mr. Timpkins, what have you there?" she asked severely.

"Tell you all about it to-morrow, Mrs. Sterns," he replied, hurrying on.

He fairly ran up the second flight, fumbled with his key, and finally got his door open, just as Mrs. Sterns appeared at the top of the stairs. He got inside and shut his door. He could hear Mrs. Sterns retreating, muttering to herself.

"To the devil with landladies!" he said aloud, as he switched on the light and set the cage on the floor.

As he did so, the hood string caught on the buttons of his sleeve, and the cover lifted as he raised his arm.

"To the devil with landladies!" shrieked the parrot in a high falsetto, to Mr. Timpkins's horrified amazement.

IV

He quickly dropped the hood over the parrot's cage, and stood in a tremble. He heard Mrs. Sterns hurrying back up the stairs and along the hall. She stopped outside his door.

"Did you say something, Mr. Timpkins?" she called.

He thought her voice sounded excited and anxious.

"Not—exactly," he managed to answer in a hoarse tone.

"I was going to tell you"—yes, her tone was indubitably supplicating—"I was going to tell you that I just borrowed your morris chair for a day or two, until I rent the front room, and then you can have it back."

After all, Mr. Timpkins was a steady boarder, and paid regularly in advance.

"Very well," he said, relief giving strength to his voice.

"Of course, if you want it right away, I suppose I could get it for you."

Mrs. Sterns had evidently mistaken the parrot's cry for Mr. Timpkins's voice, and for very good reason suspected he was exceedingly irritated.

"No, a day or two will do," said Mr. Timpkins, through the door.

Mrs. Sterns retreated. Timpkins grinned at the hooded cage of the parrot. The bird had produced results in an unexpected quarter. Perhaps it would be well if he assumed a more stern and dignified attitude toward his landlady.

He turned his attention to the package. Lifting it to the bed, he unstrapped it, and unwrapped the thick paper about it. A dozen bottles were exposed. Mr. Timpkins swore an inoffensive oath as he read one of the labels:

WALKER'S BIRD MEDICINE

A Tonic for All Feathered Pets

IT MAKES THEM SING

Parrots Talk and Canaries Warble on a Teaspoonful

DR. WALKER, THE BIRD DOCTOR

The bottles were all labeled alike. Mr. Timpkins gathered them up and put them in a lower drawer of his wardrobe. He was much incensed at the thought that he had been imposed upon by a faker. The parrot's cry was now explained. The "bird doctor" used the parrot for advertising purposes.

Well, the bird was trained, and the faker would certainly want him back. He would surely advertise. Mr. Timpkins was resolved that the man would pay him for his trouble—and pay him well.

Anyway, it had been an unusual adventure—one of those queer repasts the city was continually dishing up to him.

He hung the parrot cage outside his window on one of the hooks that held his flower box. Then he sat down in the uncomfortable chair, to think it all over.

V

Mr. Timpkins heard the doorbell ring, and a few minutes afterward steps sounded on the stairs. Two people came the length of the hall to his door.

He waited for the knock, but none came. Instead, the knob was turned, and a man stepped over the threshold. In one hand he held a light malacca stick; the other hand was under his coat at his hip. Mr. Timpkins started as he recognized the man whom he had seen swinging a cane on the opposite side of the street when he had been following the man with the cage.

Mrs. Sterns was behind the intruder.

"Pleasant evening," said the stranger, walking over to where Mr. Timpkins had hastily risen and was standing, open-mouthed and helpless.

The man felt his pockets. Then he stepped back with a quizzical look.

"I expect you thought we'd never catch on to that wrinkle," he said coolly, eying Mr. Timpkins narrowly. "Where's your sweet-talking parrot?"

Mr. Timpkins could only stare. The man's speech and manner were plainly aggressive. Perhaps he thought that the bookkeeper had stolen the parrot. It was best to spar for time.

"What—*what* parrot?" stammered Mr. Timpkins.

The stranger's face froze.

"Say, listen, my friend! The game is up. Your partner is where he belongs. You didn't think we'd be so dense as to miss that transfer of the cage and the other stuff, did you? We laid off to find out where you guys lived. We've got you cold, and you might as well come clean."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Timpkins exclaimed in a frightened voice.

"Oh, well, I don't blame you for trying to bluff it through. You don't have to talk to me unless you want to. You'll talk before you're through!"

He was looking about the place as he spoke. Now he walked to the window, keeping an eye on Mr. Timpkins, thrust aside the curtains, reached out, and brought the parrot's cage to view.

"I thought so!" he said with a grim smile, as he carried the cage to the table.

With a significant glance at Mrs. Sterns, whose eyes were popping out of her head, he lifted the hood. The parrot came to life immediately.

"'S good for the birds! Makes 'em sing! To hell with prohibition!"

The man laughed harshly.

"Clever line you taught him—that last," he sneered. "Where's the stuff?" he demanded, as he dropped the hood over the cage.

"If—if you mean—that bird medicine—it's in that drawer," stuttered Mr. Timpkins, pointing, his face white as chalk.

The stranger quickly opened the drawer and took out two of the bottles. He withdrew their corks one at a time, and sniffed at them.

"Pretty good-smelling Scotch, at that," he leered. "Had to peddle good stuff in that neighborhood, eh?"

"Scotch?" said Timpkins blankly. "It says 'bird medicine'—"

"Cut it!" said his visitor sharply. "I tell you we've got your partner, and the stuff is off. If you don't want to talk to me, you can talk to the judge. Get your hat an' coat on."

"But listen!" cried Timpkins excitedly. "I never saw that man or this—this—parrot and stuff before to-night in my life. The fellow told me to hold them for him a minute—"

He was interrupted by the other's acrid laugh grating in his ears. The man turned to the stupefied Mrs. Sterns.

"Madam, I am Saunders, a government agent. I have to tell you that you've evidently been the dupe of a bootlegger, as I have reason to believe you are running a respectable house. This man and another have been using that parrot as a blind to sell pints of booze at retail up here. The stuff was supposed to be bird medicine. They had a number of regular customers, who could not afford to buy by the case, and they took this means of delivering in small quantities. Two of our men have purchased liquor from the other fellow, and to-night was the first time we learned this man was one of the gang. Probably he is the brains of it—he's a mighty good actor. I'm sorry, but we'll have to search your house."

Mrs. Sterns remained speechless; but such was not the case with Mr. Timpkins. Confronted by the horrible truth, he blurted out his story in impassioned language, while Saunders coolly lit a cigarette.

"My landlady will tell you how long I've lived here, and where I work," Mr. Timpkins concluded, with huge beads of sweat standing out on his brow.

"Hasn't this man been in the custom of going out at night and coming in late?" Saunders asked Mrs. Sterns.

"Why—yes—sometimes," faltered the woman. "But—"

"Never mind!" said Saunders sternly. "That's enough." Then, turning upon the white-faced Timpkins: "Didn't I see you sit down on that bench up there to-night? Didn't I see you get up an' follow that other fellow? Didn't I see you stall around while he went in to deliver to two customers? Didn't I see him slip you the stuff on the corner? Wasn't I watching when you went halfway up the block and let the parrot yell that signal? Didn't I see you staring up at the windows, to see if any customers who heard would give you the high sign? Don't talk to me any more. Shut up!"

He instructed Mrs. Sterns to go down to the front door and admit another operative who was waiting there. While she was gone, he looked about Mr. Timpkins's room.

When Mrs. Sterns returned with the operative, Saunders instructed the man to remain in the house until more men arrived to search it in the morning.

"And you'd better keep this woman under surveillance until we've combed the premises. I'll take two bottles of this stuff along, and leave the rest and the parrot here. We'll take 'em down later. Now, then, come on!"

He motioned to Mr. Timpkins. The adventurous bookkeeper's heart was a cold, icy thing within his breast.

"Where—where are we going?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

"To the Ritz, of course," replied Saunders sarcastically.

But Mr. Timpkins knew.

VI

THOSE readers who, without making a practice of it, have spent a night in jail will understand the reaction which the experience had upon Mr. Timpkins, whose life, in the main, had been simple to the point of monotony. Up to this time, even his wildest adventures had been of undoubted mildness.

His first sensation, when locked behind the bars, was one of consuming fear. As the early morning hours wore on, this gave way to a feeling of intense resentment against the owner of the parrot, against the police, and against fate in general. Daybreak found him considering a new and grave angle—the problem of getting out.

After all, the average person who gets into jail is mainly concerned with getting out, and Mr. Timpkins was no exception.

When breakfast was brought in to him, he demanded a lawyer. He made other demands, also; for the seriousness of his predicament lent him courage. He was laughed at; and this made him genuinely mad. Wasn't he a respectable person? Didn't he have a respectable job? Hadn't he a respectable sum of money in the savings bank? Was this, then, to be his reward for years of toil and frugal living?

He worked himself into something closely resembling a fury, while other prisoners jeered at him. He told them who he was, and they jeered the more.

Then he began to have his doubts. Bit by bit his false courage oozed. Again the sweat came out on his brow. What, pray tell, was to prevent them from *keeping* him there?

Thus Mr. Timpkins was in a pliable mood when Saunders had him brought out later in the morning.

"You can go down to your office. I may want you again later," said the officer noncommittally.

Mr. Timpkins breathed a great sigh of relief as he hurried to the subway. It was eleven o'clock. Did the office know about —about—the mistake? He bravely hoped that no word of the ignominious affair had reached Cartweight, Sills & Co. He invented three perfectly good excuses for being so late. Anyway, they could not complain. He hadn't been tardy in years.

He had hardly entered the office when he saw that he was an object of interest. Mr. Behr, the cashier, nodded pleasantly, and spoke to Mr. Timpkins in his best accent. Others greeted the bookkeeper — fellow workers who had been in the habit of passing him up. It was all very strange—but *was* it? Mr. Timpkins blushed. He looked guilty, yet at the same time he seemed, in a way, flushed with elation. Regardless of the means by which it had been accomplished, he had at last attracted some measure of attention. He was no longer the drab spot.

Then came a peremptory summons from the private office. Mr. Timpkins's face paled, but he marched bravely forth to his fate.

He found Mr. Cartweight and Mr. Sills waiting for him, and—*Saunders!*

So the officer had followed him — had sneaked in on him—had told all to his employers! A strong emotion surged in Mr. Timpkins.

Mr. Cartweight and Mr. Sills looked grave. They rather avoided his eyes. Saunders puffed complacently on a huge cigar. Mr. Cartweight cleared his throat.

"Ah—Timpkins! Sit down!"

Mr. Timpkins dropped limply into a convenient chair.

"Ah—Timpkins! Mr. Saunders, here, has come to us and has investigated your previous record. He is disposed to be lenient."

Cartweight spoke slowly, and impressively, looking now and then at Mr. Sills, who nodded.

"In fact," Mr. Cartweight continued, "he is going to let you off. He followed you here after you were—ah—released, to make sure that you reported to work, and didn't report to—ah—any other associates you might have. I understand he has made certain other investigations, and I believe, so far as you are concerned, the case is dropped. Is that so, Mr. Saunders?"

Saunders nodded, rose, and, with a broad grin at Mr. Timpkins, took his departure.

Mr. Cartweight and Mr. Sills both seemed relieved, as well as Mr. Timpkins; but the two members of the firm now stared at the adventurous bookkeeper with puzzled expressions.

"Tell me, Timpkins, how in the devil did you ever have the nerve to do it?" Mr. Cartweight asked, arching his bushy brows.

"Do what?" said the astonished Mr. Timpkins.

"Why, peddle bootleg on the side. Isn't your salary here sufficient to support you?"

"Why—why, *Mr. Cartweight!*"

"Oh, I know it hasn't been as large as it might be," conceded the head of the firm. "We can remedy that the first of the year, I think; but you were so—so unassuming—so clever, too. That bird stunt you fellows worked was a wonder!"

Horace Cartweight actually chuckled, while Timpkins stared at him in stupefied amazement.

"But it's got to stop," said Cartweight sternly. "It would be a reflection on the firm to have a man in its employ *selling* it. I sincerely hope, Timpkins, that this will be a lesson to you. I know that you are the victim of a condition prevailing in this country of which I—we—do not altogether approve; and that's the only reason why we are permitting you to retain your position here."

As Mr. Sills nodded confirmation of this remarkable statement, Mr. Timpkins found his voice.

"I don't *have* to sell bootleg or anything like that!" he shrilled. "I've money in the bank that I've saved. Didn't that—that Saunders tell you how I was tricked into this thing?"

Then he leaped to his feet and told the story that he had told Saunders—which Saunders had already told, in part, to his employers. They listened patiently. When the bookkeeper finished, Mr. Cartweight drummed upon his desk with his fingers and stared absently out of the window.

"Well, anyway," he said tartly, swinging about in his chair, "that will be all, Mr. Timpkins."

Timpkins left the office stunned. Didn't they believe him?

Mr. Morgan, the junior partner, glowing in new tweeds, stopped him.

"I was thinking," he said, with a furtive smile, "that if you have any of that stuff left—the officer said it was pretty good grade—I might be able to take it off your hands. Some fellows at the club — you know! Of course, I don't sanction such a business as a rule, but in your case, and to help you to get started right again—"

Mr. Morgan walked away, leaving Timpkins white-faced, gripping his palms. He saw Mr. Behr, the cashier, smiling at him amiably. Then he hurried for his coat and hat, and flung himself out of the office.

VII

Mr. Timpkins listened sleepily to various details hurled at him by Mrs. Sterns. They had searched the house—*her* house! No, they hadn't found anything, of course; but the *disgrace!* And that parrot! *That parrot!* It had hung outside his window all morning while the officers had pursued their labors. They had taken off the hood, for spite, of course, and the things that parrot had said!

Well, she, Mrs. Sterns, was a nervous wreck. She probably would have to go to the hospital. Maybe he, Mr. Timpkins, would learn some time to quit gadding around at night. He was an old fool. He could keep his room, but he would have to change his ways and settle down. No wonder they thought at the office that he had been doing a little bootlegging on the side. Who wouldn't, under the circumstances? Yes, he had better get some sleep.

It was dinner time when Mr. Timpkins woke. He went bravely down to the table. His sleep had refreshed him, and he felt strangely exultant. He smiled down Mrs. Sterns's frowns until even that lady confessed that it was a "strange world."

Then Mr. Timpkins had a visitor. He smiled and stammered in embarrassment when he recognized the pleasant-faced lady from across the way.

"I took the liberty of calling to ask you about your parrot," she said in a sweet voice. "I have one, and have always been interested in them. I thought that yours—from the way it—it talked this morning—might be a sea parrot. I've always been interested in parrots that have been on ships, because my husband—I'm a widow—followed the sea."

Something in her manner and voice struck a responsive chord in Mr. Timpkins. He ushered her into the parlor, and poured his strange tale into her sympathetic ears. It almost seemed as if they had known each other for ages.

When he showed her to the door, it had begun to rain. He procured his umbrella, and took her to her home around the block.

Half an hour later, Mrs. Sterns was staring at him in astonishment while he spoke in a new and authoritative tone.

" Mrs. Sterns, regardless of the unfortunate happenings of the past twenty-four hours. I shall have to ask that my chair be returned to my room to-night, or I shall have to seek other accommodations."

Then he walked briskly up the stairs.

Another half hour, and Mr. Timpkins was seated in his morris chair under his shaded lamp. On the arm of the chair was a leather-bound book. It was opened at a page. Mr. Timpkins dipped a pen in ink and began to write:

No. 48—ADVENTURE OF THE PARROT AND THE REVENUE OFFICERS AND THE LADY—

He paused, and stared dreamily at the window.

For a Name

GOUTRAN, THE PIG, COULD NOT HAVE FORESEEN THE PURPOSE TO WHICH HIS FIVE HUNDRED FRANCS WOULD BE PUT

By Clara Maxwell Taft

DABNEY, threading the streets of Paris, head and shoulders above the crowd, suggested, with his narrow frame, torpid eyes, and pallid face, the pike of Revolutionary days topped with the head of an aristocrat.

His feet fumbled and behaved themselves uncertainly, as if his brain had no control over members so remote. One arm swung heavily at his side, like the pendulum of a discouraged clock. The other curved about a fair-sized painting, his last completed work, four times rejected by unappreciative dealers, on its way to the fifth hope. His waistcoat flapped over a craving for three meals now overdue.

At the Rue Bonaparte he turned to the right, diagonaled his way across the street, as one to whom the shortest cut had become a necessity, and stumbled up three black flights of stairs. A pull at a worn and dirty bell rope, followed by a clang, hoarse and strident as a mocking laugh, heralded his entrance to a cluttered back room. What might have been a glance from under a pair of pudgy eyelids served as his greeting.

Goutran, without rising, held out an unsteady hand for the canvas that Dabney had already commenced to uncover. Without so much as a nod toward the artist, the flaccid art dealer rose, placed the picture upright on the table, stepped backward to the far side of the room, and worked fat round hands into inadequate trouser pockets. First from the corner of the left eye, then from the corner of the right, he shot a hurried squint at Dabney's bit of Luxembourg Garden, which so poorly fitted into this joyless room.

" The eye of the buyer and the eye of the seller," the people of the Quartier Latin had come to term these slits of light that lodged beneath the pulpy lids of Goutran. If the right eye sometimes appraised and approved, often the left eye distrusted. A pig, the artists called Goutran. He was not in the business as an art lover, but as a money getter; yet a really good thing never found him cold, though his tactics for acquiring something for next to nothing were well known and vigorously despised.

Clutching Dabney's canvas close in his thick fingers, he thrust his great face into it. His coarse lashes almost grazed the glowing trees, the steaming flowers, the shimmery tremble of the baking air that enveloped, like a white-hot fog, this captured bit of noonday.

"Um! Raining," he said at length, with a twist of his heavy shoulders.

Dabney flushed and winced; but he knew Goutran, and knew his tricks. He pulled aside the window curtain and curiously peered into the clouding day.

"Not yet," he responded, pretending to misunderstand.

Goutran drew up the collar of his coat.

"Too cold for most people."

He shivered. He rubbed his hands together, as if contact with the canvas had chilled them, and directed his tiny searchlights along a line that swerved at Dabney and terminated at the picture.

"Five hundred francs for it." He rolled his heavy head from side to side. "Not a *sou* more!" he snarled, catching the stiffening of the other's figure.

A great pulse choked and beat at Dabney's throat. He drew a hand across his neck, as if to unstrangle his voice.

"Five *thousand* will buy it," he managed at last, his eyes flaring. "It's big—you know it's big!"

Goutran forced a dry chuckle.

"The price, yes—quite so."

Taking care to busy his fingers solely with the wrapping, though they itched to be at the pudgy art dealer's grimy collar, Dabney grasped his canvas. From a lower tenement a whiff of burning soup writhed in through the shutters, worked its way up his nostrils, touched the back of his tongue. Goutran got it at the same instant, and ran a glance up the other's hungry length. The muscles of his mouth gave way to let a smile sag off:

"And how are the cafés these days, M. Dabney, eh?"

The question caught Dabney in the doorway.

"They're well rid of me, Goutran—and I of you!"

"You'll be back!" shrilled Goutran.

II

Down the three murky flights Dabney lurched and tottered, his precious canvas pressed under a quivering arm, the echo of Goutran's "You'll be back" trailing after him like an inverted prophecy. On the lowest step crouched a diminutive drab mongrel. Dabney almost stepped on the wretched animal.

"Hungry, too, old sport?" he asked, stooping, for a second, to scratch between the dejected ears. "Wish I had a bone for you!"

At every corner, food called and beckoned him: called, here, in a voice no louder than the chink of dish upon dish; beckoned, there, with a long and odorous finger of crusty bread. From across the street the Pantheon tendered its printed invitation: *"Le Petit Dejeuner—Le Dejeuner à la Fourchette—Table d'Hôte Avec Vin"*—promising better and bigger as the day waxed.

Dabney sighed his sincere regrets, lifted his shoulders, drew back his head, and partook in deep drafts of his fourth consecutive meal from nature's restaurant for the empty-pocketed.

The Rue Bonaparte leads directly to the Seine, and just across the river the massive Louvre stretches its great stone arms. From the river, with its skimming notes of color, Dabney turned his eyes to the gray bridge, with its huddling gray figures and humping cabs, and to the grayer Louvre. Whatever of solace the whole gray world contained blossomed within those grizzled walls—rows of color, ranks of haunting, whispering personalities, lines of dried and faded signatures more vocal than the million voices of this seething, living Paris.

Halfway over the bridge he stopped, leaned on the parapet, and looked down upon the busy river. Boat after boat poked its nose from beneath the arches and puffed on toward Notre Dame. If only he could drop his maddening thoughts upon a passing craft and watch them hurry from him, melting in the widening distance like colors from a fading sunset! If only he could hurl after them each vestige of defeat! That great fellow in the red shirt on the sliding deck below—what sport to frame his coarse, unsuspecting neck in a shattered fragment of the Luxembourg!

Dabney chuckled. Half unconsciously he raised an arm.

"Hello!"

A genial voice reached his ear, and a smart clap on the lifted shoulder swung him face about. There they stood, three in a row, his best pals, whom he had not seen in weeks—Spencer, the American student; Quinan, the English cartoonist, and Benet, the young French poet.

Sliding his canvas to the sidewalk, Dabney strove to fling his welcoming hands in three directions at once.

"Hello! Hello! Hello!" he cried—to each man a separate greeting, as if to compensate for the shortage in hands.

The three faces shone upon him. Spencer continued his cordial slaps on the shoulder, Benet took possession of both hands in his own two, while Quinan, the cartoonist, with an eye for line and shadow, took a step backward and sent a roaming look from the head to the feet of his friend.

"Say, haven't you been overdoin' it a bit, old man?" he queried. "Too much work and no play, you know!" Here a second glance took in the neglected canvas. "Let's see what you have to show for it, anyway!"

Dabney reached for the picture. The three clustered about it. With twitching lips the artist studied the pupils of their eyes and the revealing lines about their mouths. A warmth started at his feet and tingled to his ears.

The Frenchman was first to speak.

"Ah, my friend!" he cried. "It is my poetry—in color! My poetry that is not yet written—that sings itself here!" He pressed a hand to his heart. "You understand, eh?"

He clasped his hands, only to fling them apart and bring them together again. His little beard and the shiny ends of his mustache quivered.

Spencer, with a hand on Dabney's shoulder, said nothing; but, to Dabney, the gleam in his friend's eyes was more golden than words. It was the practical Englishman who must know where the artist intended to dispose of it.

Dabney sniggered.

"I was on the point of pitching it overboard when you fellows came. See!" He motioned toward a little steamer far down the river. "It would have been almost at the Morgue by this time."

"Man!" Quinan bellowed, taking the speaker at his word. "That's too warm for dead eyes! I tell you"—enraged, he stepped two paces away, and cracked his knuckles for emphasis—"as sure as a summer day is a live thing, *that canvas breathes!*"

Dabney drew a sharp breath. His lifeless eyes lighted. This from Quinan!

"Shown it anywhere?" inquired Quinan, falling back to the practical.

Once more Dabney drooped. On the tips of four fingers he counted off four French names, and finished with the thumb, and Goutran.

"Goutran, the pig!" snorted Quinan, supported by grunts from the others. "Well, what did he have to say about it?"

"A little less than usual, but snarlier and more insulting things, if that can be possible. He seemed more than ordinarily disgruntled—"

"But don't you know as well as the rest of us," thundered Quinan, "that Goutran buys for a crumb and sells for a loaf? He'll blur out your very name and smear another in—and off goes your treasure to South America, or farther!" Quinan's stiff bulk bent into caricature as he smacked his lips and flung a grotesque kiss in a vague direction. "Then, of course, it's good-by to you, as far as recognition goes!"

"But do you know Coppée?" the little Frenchman burst in, excitedly balancing on the tips of his pointed toes. "Coppée, who buys a picture as he could choose a pearl—who knows what has gone to the making of it—who pays what it is worth? Best of all, who makes the artist's name—if so he deserve—to be seen, to be heard—"

Benet's enthusiasm was cut short by Spencer, who also knew Coppée, and warmed to the idea.

"It will pay you to wait, Dabney. He returns to Paris in a month. As you value your life, old man, hang on to that square of sunlight."

Dabney shrugged, and spread his hands. His thought shot down to the gnawing sensation beneath his waistcoat.

"But how to keep going for a month?" he asked. "It takes more than two long legs and a willing heart!"

There ensued a puzzled moment of silence, which Quinan broke with his great voice.

"I've got it! Come with us to Renart. Spencer's going to unload some stuff on him—I'm not above it now and then myself. He sometimes pays in advance, too. Thank God for Renart!"

Dabney had never sunk so low as Renart—Renart, the one-eyed man, who kept the something-of-everything shop in the square of the Palais Royal. He often bought bits of water color—the same bits that all art students did, and do, and will do. Still, to keep his head above water until Coppée should return—

Spencer hailed a cab. He and Quinan together were good for the fare. They rattled the store of their pockets into the cups of their four hands.

"Tell me more of this Coppée," urged Dabney, sinking into the grateful softness of the back seat. "Tell me all about this incomparable person."

The men's words ran like music through his brain. If he sold this first picture to Renart, he could live for months on the proceeds, and already he was visualizing his second—"Sunrise in the Tuilleries Gardens." Under drooped lids, through thick lashes, he saw it as it should be—the tiny streak of red flowing along the edge of the east, interspacing the pale rose tree shafts with horizontal lines of flame; the gradual effulgence, as sky and leaf and tree and grass awakened.

The scraping of the cab against the curb jogged Dabney's eyes open. The shop they presently entered resembled most of the others in the square of decayed royalty that is still called the Palais Royal. It was grimy, narrow, with a suggestion of hollowness, yet, curiously, it was overpacked, like a badly filled cavity. As the one-eyed owner shifted toward them, stumblingly dodging a broken cabinet to crash into a portrait-littered table, Dabney wondered, scanning the dusty faces of a dozen sprawling saints, what manner of thing he could produce half bad enough to please this tawdry dealer.

"How about a corner of the Tour St. Jacques?" he ventured, as Renart's single lens focused upon him. "I can make it clear-cut, with a golden sun in the west or a red one in the east—or, better, a smiling crescent moon for luck; and all for the price of a quart of coffee and a yard or two of bread!"

Renart slumped before them, doubtful. His eye meditatively sought the farthest and grimiest corner of the shop.

"Some people like it best with a rainbow behind," sang Quinan's booming tones, "like a slice of Berceaux's ice cream." He swung an arm toward the *pâtisserie* across the court. "Neapolitan effect, we call it. Try him, Renart. He's good. He's worth ten francs in advance."

With head hung sidewise, the dealer darted a suspicious glance at Quinan, then leveled a longer and more critical look at Dabney. At last he slipped a hand into a greasy pocket and brought forth eight smooth francs and a number of grubby coppers, which, with apparent reluctance, he handed over.

Very lovingly Dabney regarded them. They would keep him on his feet — and more steadily than at present — until his intended atrocity became a colorful fact. One by one he dropped them into his pocket, and jingled them about. Turning to his friends, he plastered a large palm over the cavity of his stomach.

"Meet me at Messier's," he said. "I've a pressing engagement."

The others nodded comprehendingly.

"See you later," Quinan shouted, "if we're lucky!"

III

With long, loose strides Dabney crossed the bridge. Rounding the corner of the first block, without any slackening of speed, he landed a copper, with a dull plunk, in the hollow of a blind beggar's hat. The sightless eyes thanked him.

Turning the corner of the second block, Messier's caught him by the nose—Messier's, with its pungent coffee and steaming *brioche*. Messier's was making a collection of his unpaid checks.

"*C'est la dernière fois, monsieur,*" had been Mme. Messier's little *hors d'œuvre* of two days ago. But what did that matter now? Dabney flipped his pocketed fingers, and chuckled. Then he strode into the little restaurant and up to the desk at the end of the narrow room.

"*Bon jour, madame!*" he cried breezily, smiling into two beady black eyes just discernible beneath much tousled false hair. "Look!" He drew the hand from his pocket. "Listen!" He closed the hand and shook it. "I can pay to-day!"

Quickly up and down, to betoken entire satisfaction, jerked the dark, frowzy head. *Madame* was fat—very fat. She labored up from the money drawer, rolled herself before him across the almost deserted room to his favorite table, and pulled out his special chair from beneath the spotted cloth. Then, with her own stubby hands, she brought him a smoking cup, a forearm's length of bread, and an omelette.

At the end of ten minutes Dabney repeated the order. His backbone felt tighter; he straightened out one leg, then the other, and gloried in their firmness. At last, and almost contentedly, he drew the napkin across his lips, and rose to go.

Stooping for his painting, a little dry sob from the direction of the corner table caught and held him. He turned, sharply.

As he did so, there was a sudden flutter, and a small, light-haired woman brushed aside the disordered dishes and dropped her pink face on the mottled tablecloth. The sob grew into a cry which strangled in her throat, and two pudgy hands groped among the dishes and decanters toward the helpless-looking object in the opposite chair.

As this object received, not eagerly, the hands thus stretched to him, Dabney, now a few steps nearer, recognized Henri Napoleon, a young, stringy waiter, not long in Mme. Messier's employ. Fish eyes, a spatulate nose, and a wabbly mouth composed the features of the sodden face. Wrapped in a grimy apron, he resembled nothing so much as a worm in a dirty bandage. A long lock of dank hair, falling straight between his brows, served but to accentuate his unlikeness to his illustrious namesake.

It was evident that the waiter was not annoying the young woman, and quite as evident that he was the cause of her tears. It seemed equally clear to Dabney that this was *their* pie, and no concern for *his* finger; yet, somehow, the girl's appealing plumpness whispered to his chivalry. In two strides he was at her side.

Henri Napoleon shuffled to his long feet and stood at a corner of the board, drawing lines on the cloth with a dirty thumb nail. The girl raised her head and blinked the tears from her lashes. Her pink face grew pinker.

"Oh, *monsieur!*" she sighed, clasping the round little hands. Then, with no apparent thought that the stranger would understand her language, she proceeded, though haltingly, in his. "Sit down, if you please. It is that I must speak to some one—other than Henri."

At these words the waiter shot a sly look toward the kitchen, and turned as if to reach it with the greatest expedition; but the girl was quick. She caught at his apron strings and twisted him about.

"Stay there!" ordered Dabney, pointing to the young man's huge boots, as if Henri Napoleon might step out of them and be off.

The waiter sank to a chair near the young woman.

"You see, *monsieur,* my tears"—with soft, short fingers she touched the swollen eyelids—"are because Henri, after all that have been between us, refuse to marry me!"

Thus, at a bound, Dabney found himself in the midst of their affair. Henri Napoleon, sheepish, with eyes not meeting his, seemed to perceive that the artist, as through a dirty glass, had read the past. The girl, with candid, helpless gaze, seemed trusting him to cipher out the future.

"And why," asked Dabney of her, though his eyes rested with sternness on the man, "has Henri refused to marry you?"

"Ah, *monsieur!*" Here the tears formed and fell again. "It is the matter of the money—the five hundred francs I promise him I should have!"

"Five hundred francs!" Dabney's hand slapped down on the table, and the dishes danced. He tried, with his own eyes, to meet the soggy optics of the waiter shifting about under their limp lashes. "You—you worm!"

But Henri Napoleon said nothing.

"Speak up, man—if you *are* one! Don't you love the girl enough to marry her without a *sou?* If you don't, you don't know what love is!"

"Oh, *monsieur,* you are mistaken!" The girl's voice breathed in his direction, while tenderness took the place of tears in her eyes. "You are mistake. Henri know what love is. Henri *is* love!"

At another time the thought of Henri Napoleon in the rôle of Cupid might have proved too much for Dabney's imagination; but a look at the girl held his mind to her immediate need. He leaned toward her. He felt a sudden yearning to take the round little hands in his own.

"My dear young woman," he asked softly, "do you think that five hundred francs—five *thousand* francs—could *buy* love?"

"They could buy Henri. That is enough, *monsieur.*"

She sent toward the waiter a look so heavy with adoration that Dabney, gazing on its smirking, slimy recipient, could scarce restrain his twitching hands. He felt a soft pressure on his arm, and in a still more tender tone the girl added:

"Besides, *monsieur*—there is to think of—another. He must—when he is come—have a name. It is for this that my father—when he know—refuse the money."

For the first time the slippery lips of the waiter parted in speech.

"That is why we *must* have it — the money. Five hundred francs is cheap—for a name!" Almost squarely he met Dabney's eyes. His general stringiness drew into a rigid line. His lips loosened over sharp yellow teeth, like a beast's. "Not a *sou* less!" He barked the words at Dabney.

"Not a *sou* less!"

Silently Dabney repeated the phrase. What were those words trying to call from his memory?

Suddenly he sat straight, and jerked his head toward the painting which he had left leaning against the table across the room. Goutran, the pig! It was Goutran's snarling voice he heard, and Goutran's insult that rang in his head in words so nearly identical:

"Five hundred francs for it—not a *sou* more!"

Again Dabney slouched—and smiled.

Five hundred francs for—what?

Five hundred francs for—a *name*. Henri Napoleon had said it; and cheap at that.

A name! Well, was it not for a name that he had mixed his paints, the best, perhaps, that he would ever mix—that he had sat, noontime after noontime, alone in the deserted heat of the Luxembourg Garden—that he had caught, at last, one baking, shining hour, and made it his?

Abruptly he rose. He touched a hand to the girl's soft shoulder.

"Wait," he said. "Wait!" he repeated, a little more sternly, to the staring Henri Napoleon.

He stepped to the canvas, gently placed it under an arm, and set his long legs moving.

IV

Half an hour later, as unostentatiously as possible, Dabney handed over the shining dower. The little bride, all pudgy smile, stretched up and left a kiss near her benefactor's ear.

Then, suddenly, the place became crowded with the presence of his three friends—Quinan's booming voice, Benet's light, high-pitched enthusiasm, and Spencer's hearty normality.

"Just met Sophie and her faithless Napoleon," roared Quinan, "prancing for the priest!"

"Ah! So her name is Sophie?" Dabney passed them, making for the door. "I might have guessed it—a soft, sweet, weak little name!"

"But how in the name of everything," blared Quinan, "did such a pig of a father come by such a—"

"Pig of a father?" Dabney turned to stare. "You mean—you don't mean—"

"Goutran, of course," said Spencer. "Didn't you know that—"

Something in Dabney's face stopped him.

"Not going, old chap?" Quinan swung an arm and curved a huge palm over the artist's shoulder. "Well, let's have one more squint at the masterpiece first!"

"The masterpiece," Dabney brought out thickly, and with crimsoning cheeks, "is not due—yet."

YOU

You make me think of all the lovely things
That God has made.
The azure hue of summer skies;
The oak tree's shade;

A crystal psalm high-flung by soaring lark;
A pansy's face;
The harp-sweet humming of the pines;
A sunny place.

These are the things that please the poet soul—
The magic clew
That led my heart to find, dear love,
These things in you!

Lilian Nicholson

Timeworn Town

THE STORY OF THE STRANGE MURDER MYSTERY IN HISTORIC HATHELSBOROUGH

By J. S. Fletcher

Author of "The Town of Crooked Ways," "The Harvest Moon," etc.

RICHARD BRENT, a London newspaper man, comes to Hathelsborough to visit his cousin, John Wallingford, mayor of the old north country town. Bunning, caretaker of the Moot Hall, takes him upstairs to the mayor's office, where the two men are shocked to find Wallingford dead at his desk, stabbed through the body. In the room are two possible clews to the murderer—a cambric handkerchief, blood-stained and half burned, in the fireplace, and a long, sharp rapier thrown behind a bookcase.

Brent suspects that the murder was due to political reasons, as Wallingford had incurred much hostility on account of his efforts to sweep away certain long-standing abuses in the government of the old borough. He interviews Alderman Simon Crood, leader of the conservative party in Hathelsborough, and Crood's henchmen, Mallett and Coppinger, but without result, although he finds an ally in Queenie Crood, a young girl who is the alderman's niece and housekeeper. Simon Crood has a brother, Krevin Crood, who draws an unearned pension from the borough—a typical instance of the "graft" that the late mayor sought to abolish.

Determined to solve the mystery of his cousin's murder, and, if he can, to carry on Wallingford's work for reform, Brent buys a house in Hathelsborough and announces himself as a candidate for the seat in the town council left vacant by the late mayor's death.

At the coroner's inquest, Hawthwaite, the superintendent of police, brings forward evidence which seems to cast suspicion on Dr. Wellesley, the police surgeon. A possible motive for the crime is disclosed in the fact that both Wallingford and Wellesley were ardent admirers of an attractive young widow, Mrs. Saumarez, who admits on the witness stand that there was jealousy between the two men. Dr. Carstairs, the police surgeon's assistant, testifies that Wellesley left his surgery—a back room of his house, which adjoins the Moot Hall—just about the time of the murder, and was absent for several minutes.

Cotman, Dr. Wellesley's lawyer, now intervenes to protect his client.

XV

COTMAN turned to Carstairs, who had lingered in the witness box during this exchange between the coroner and Dr. Wellesley's lawyer.

"Dr. Carstairs," he began, "you say that after being away from his surgery for nineteen minutes on the evening of Mr. Wallingford's death, Dr. Wellesley came back to you there?"

"Yes," answered Carstairs. "Yes—that is so."

"Was any one with you in the surgery when he returned?"

"No—no one."

"You were alone with him, until he went out again to the appointment in Meadow Gate?"

"Yes, quite alone."

"So you had abundant opportunity of observing him. Did he seem at all excited or flurried? Did you notice anything unusual in his manner?"

"I did not. He was just himself."

"Quite calm and normal?"

"Quite."

"Didn't give you the impression that he had just been going through any particularly moving or trying episode, such as murdering a fellow creature?"

"He did not," replied Carstairs, without the ghost of a smile. "He was just as usual."

"When did you see him next, after he went out to keep the appointment in Meadow Gate?"

"About half past eight, or a little later."

"Where?"

"At the mortuary. He sent for me. I

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went to the mortuary, and found him there with Dr. Barber. They were making an examination of the dead man, and wanted my help."

"Was Dr. Wellesley excited or upset then?"

"He was not. He seemed to me—I'm speaking professionally, mind you—remarkably cool."

Cotman suddenly sat down, and turned to his client with a smile on his lips. Evidently he made some cynical remark to Wellesley, for Wellesley smiled, too.

"Smart chap, Cotman!" whispered Tansley to Brent. "That bit of cross-examination will tell with the jury. Now, what next?"

Bunning, recalled from the previous sitting, came next—merely to repeat that the mayor went up to his parlor at twenty-five minutes past seven, and that he and Mr. Brent found his worship dead just after eight o'clock.

Following him came Dr. Barber, who testified that when he first saw Wallingford's dead body, just about a quarter past eight, he came to the conclusion that death had taken place about forty-five minutes previously, or perhaps a little less. And from him Cotman drew evidence that Wellesley, in the examination at the mortuary, was normal, calm, and collected—and, Dr. Barber added of his own will, greatly annoyed and horrified at the murder.

Brent was beginning to get sick of this new development. To him it seemed idle and purposeless. He whispered as much to Tansley; but Tansley shook his head.

"Can't say that," he replied. "Where was Wellesley during that nineteen minutes' absence from the surgery? He'll have to explain that, anyway. They'll have more evidence than what we've heard. Hello, here's Walkershaw, the borough surveyor! What are they going to get out of him, I wonder?"

Brent watched an official-looking person make his way to the witness box. He was armed with a quantity of rolls of drawing paper, and was accompanied by a clerk, whose duty, it presently appeared, was to act as a living easel and hold up these things, diagrams and outlines, while his principal explained them.

Presently the eager audience found itself listening to what was neither more nor less than a lecture on the architecture of Hathelsborough Moot Hall and its immediately adjacent buildings. Then, of course, Brent began to see the drift of the borough surveyor's evidence.

The whole block of masonry between Copper Alley and Piper's Passage, testified Walkershaw, illustrating his observations by pointing to the large diagram held on high by his clerk, was extremely ancient. In it there were three separate buildings—separate, that was, in their use, but standing together like one structure.

First, next to Copper Alley, which ran out of Meadow Gate, came the big house long used as a bank. Then came the Moot Hall itself. Next, between the Moot Hall and Piper's Passage, which was a narrow entry between River Gate and St. Laurence Lane, stood Dr. Wellesley's house. Until comparatively recent times this had been the official residence of the mayor of Hathelsborough; and between it and the Moot Hall there was a definite means of communication—in short, a private door.

There was a general pricking of ears upon this announcement. Tansley, at Brent's side, indulged in a low whistle. He saw the full significance of Walkershaw's statement.

"Another link in the chain, Brent!" he muttered. "'Pon my word, they're putting it together rather cleverly! Nineteen minutes' absence—door between his house and the Moot Hall—come!"

Brent made no comment. He was closely following the borough surveyor as that worthy pointed out on his plans and diagrams the means of communication between the Moot Hall and the old dwelling house at its side.

In former days, said Walkershaw, some mayor of Hathelsborough had caused a door to be made in a certain small room in the house. That door opened on a passage in the Moot Hall which led to the corridor wherein the mayor's parlor was situated. It had no doubt been used by many occupants of the mayoral chair during their term of office. Of late, however, nobody seemed to have known of it; but the borough surveyor, having examined it, for the purposes of this inquiry, during the last day or two, had found that it showed unmistakable signs of recent usage. In fact, the lock and bolts had quite recently been oiled.

The evidence of this witness came to a dramatic end in the shape of a question from the coroner.

"How long would it take, then, for any person to go by this private passage from Dr. Wellesley's house to the mayor's parlor in the Moot Hall?"

"One minute," replied Walkershaw promptly. "If anything, less than that."

Cotman, who had been whispering with his client during the borough surveyor's evidence, asked no questions; and presently the interest of the court shifted to a little shrewd-faced, self-possessed woman who tripped into the witness box and admitted cheerfully that she was Mrs. Marriner, proprietor of Marriner's Laundry, and that she washed for several of the best families in Hathelsborough. The fragment of handkerchief which had been found in the mayor's parlor was handed to her for inspection, and the coroner asked her if she could say definitely whether she knew whose it was. There was considerable doubt and skepticism in his voice as he put the question, but Mrs. Marriner showed herself the incarnation of sure and positive conviction.

"Yes, sir," she answered. "It's Dr. Wellesley's."

"You must wash a great many handkerchiefs at your laundry, Mrs. Marriner," observed the coroner. "How can you be sure about one—about that one?"

"I'm sure enough about that one, sir, because it's one of a dozen that's gone through my hands many a time," asserted Mrs. Marriner. "There's nobody in the town, sir—leastways not among my customers, and I wash for all the very best people, sir — that has any handkerchiefs like them, except Dr. Wellesley. They're the very finest French cambric. That there is a piece of one of the doctor's best handkerchiefs, sir, as sure as I'm in this here box—which I wish I wasn't!"

The coroner asked nothing further. He was plainly impatient about the handkerchief evidence, if not wholly skeptical, and he waved Mrs. Marriner away; but Cotman stopped her.

"I suppose, Mrs. Marriner, that mistakes are sometimes made when you and your assistants send home the clean clothes?" he suggested. "Things get in the wrong baskets, eh?"

"Well, not often, at my place, sir," replied Mrs. Marriner. "We're always very careful."

"Still—sometimes, you know?"

"Oh, I'll not say that they don't sometimes, sir," admitted Mrs. Marriner. "We're all of us human creatures, as you're very well aware, sir."

"This particular handkerchief may have got into a wrong basket?" urged Cotman. "It's possible?"

"Oh, it's possible, sir," said Mrs. Marriner. "Mistakes will happen, sir."

Mrs. Marriner disappeared among the crowd, and a new witness took her place. She, too, was a woman—a young and pretty one, and in a tearful and nervous condition. Tansley glanced at her and turned with a significant glance to Brent.

"Great Scott!" he whispered. "Wellesley's housemaid!"

XVI

INTEREST was beginning to thicken. The people in court, from Simon Crood, pompous and aloof in his new grandeur of chief magistrate, to Spizey the bellman, equally pompous in his ancient livery, were already open-mouthed with wonder at the new and startling development; but the sudden advent of the young and pretty domestic, whose tears betrayed her unwillingness to come forward, deepened the interest still further. Everybody leaned forward toward the center of the court, intent on hearing what the girl had to tell.

She paid no attention to these manifestations of inquisitiveness. Standing in the witness box, a tear-soaked handkerchief in her hands, half sullen, half resentful of mouth and eye, she looked at nobody but the coroner. Her whole expression was that of a defenseless animal, pinned in a corner and watchful of its captor.

This time it was not the coroner who put questions to the witness. There had been some whispering between him, Hawthwaite, and Meeking, the barrister who represented the police authorities; and it was Meeking who turned to the reluctant girl and began to get her information from her by means of bland, suavely expressed, half suggesting interrogatories.

Winifred Wilson—twenty years of age—housemaid at Dr. Wellesley's—been in the doctor's employ about fourteen months.

"Did you give certain information to the police recently?" inquired Meeking, going straight to his point, as soon as these preliminaries were over. "Information bearing on the matter now being inquired into?"

"Yes, sir," replied the witness in a low voice.

"Was it relating to something that you saw in Dr. Wellesley's house, on the evening on which Mr. Wallingford was found dead in the mayor's parlor?"

"Yes, sir."

"What was it that you saw?"

The girl hesitated. Evidently on the verge of a fresh outburst of tears, she compressed her nether lip, looking fixedly at the ledge of the witness box.

"Don't be afraid," said Meeking. "We only want the truth. Tell that, and you've nothing to be afraid of or to reproach yourself with. Now what did you see?"

The girl's answer came in a whisper.

"I saw Dr. Wellesley."

"You saw your master, Dr. Wellesley. Where did you see Dr. Wellesley?"

"On the hall staircase, sir."

"On the hall staircase. That, I suppose, is the main staircase of the house? Very well! Now where were you?"

"Up on the top landing, sir."

"What were you doing there?"

"I'd just come out of my room, sir. I'd been getting dressed to go out."

"And how came you to see your master on the staircase?"

"I heard a door open on the landing below, sir, and I just looked over the banister, to see who it was."

"Who was it?"

"Dr. Wellesley, sir."

"What was he doing?"

"He'd just come out of the drawing-room door, sir."

"Are you sure he had come out of that particular door?"

"Well, sir, I saw him close it behind him."

"What happened then?"

"He stood still for a minute, sir, on the landing."

"Doing anything?"

"No, sir—just standing."

"And what then?"

"He went downstairs, sir."

"And disappeared?"

"He went toward the surgery, sir."

"How was the staircase lighted when you saw all this?"

"Well, sir, there was a light in the hall, at the foot of the staircase, and there was another light on the drawing-room floor landing."

"Then you could see Dr. Wellesley quite clearly?"

"Yes, sir."

"How was he dressed?"

"He had his surgery jacket on, sir—a white linen jacket."

"You saw Dr. Wellesley quite clearly, wearing a white linen jacket, and coming out of the drawing-room door. Now I want to ask you about the drawing-room. Is there another room opening out of Dr. Wellesley's drawing-room?"

"Yes, sir."

"How big is it?"

"It's a little room. Not very big, sir."

"What is it used for? What is there in it, now?"

"Nothing much, sir — some bookcases, and a desk, and a chair or two."

"Is there a door on its farther side—the side next to the Moot Hall?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you ever seen it open?"

"No, sir, never."

"You don't know where it gives access to, I suppose?"

"No, sir."

"Might be a cupboard door, eh?"

"I always thought it was a cupboard door, sir."

"Very good! Now I want you to be very particular about answering my next question. What time was it when you saw Dr. Wellesley come out of his drawing-room door?"

"It would be just about a quarter to eight, sir."

"Are you quite sure about that?"

"Quite sure, sir."

"Did anything fix the time on your mind?"

"Yes, sir—at least, I heard the clocks strike the quarter, just after—the Moot Hall clock, sir, and the parish church."

"You're sure it was a quarter to eight o'clock that you heard?"

"Yes, sir, quite sure."

"Why are you quite sure?"

The witness reddened a little, and looked shyly aside.

"Well, sir, I had to meet somebody, outside the house, at a quarter to eight o'clock," she murmured.

"I see! Did you meet him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Punctually?"

"I might have been a minute late, sir. The clocks had done striking."

"Very good! And just before they began to strike you saw Dr. Wellesley come out of his drawing-room door?"

"Yes, sir."

Meeking suddenly dropped back into his seat and began to shuffle his papers. The coroner glanced at Cotman. Cotman, with a cynical smile, got to his feet and confronted the witness.

"Was it your young man that you went out to meet at a quarter to eight o'clock that evening?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," admitted the girl.

"What's his name?"

"Joe Green, sir."

"Did you tell Joe Green that you had just seen Dr. Wellesley come out of his drawing-room?"

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

"Because I didn't think anything of it, sir."

"You didn't think anything of it! And pray when did you begin to think something of it?"

"Well, sir, it was—it was when the police began asking questions."

"And of whom did they ask questions?"

"Me and the other servants, sir."

"Dr. Wellesley's servants?"

"Yes, sir."

"How many servants does Dr. Wellesley keep?"

"Four, sir, and a boy."

"So the police came asking questions about Dr. Wellesley, did they? What about him?"

"Well, sir, it was about what we knew of Dr. Wellesley's movements on that evening, sir — where he was from half past seven to eight o'clock. Then I remembered, sir."

"And told the police?"

"No, sir—not then. I said nothing to anybody, at first."

"But you did later on. Now, to whom?"

The witness here began to show more signs of tearfulness.

"Don't cry!" said Cotman. "To whom did you first mention this?"

"Well, sir, it was to Mrs. Lane. I got so upset about it that I told her."

"Who is Mrs. Lane?"

"She's the lady that looks after the Girls' Friendly Society, sir."

"Are you a member of that?"

"Yes, sir."

"So you went and told Mrs. Lane all about it?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did Mrs. Lane say?"

"She said I must tell Mr. Hawthwaite, sir."

"Did she take you to Mr. Hawthwaite?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you told him all that you have told us now?"

"Yes, sir—Mrs. Lane said I must."

"You didn't want to, eh?"

Here the girl burst into tears. Cotman turned to the coroner.

"I have no further questions to put to this witness, sir," he said; "but I would make a respectful suggestion to yourself. I urge that my client, Dr. Wellesley, should be called at once. We know now that the police have been secretly working up a case against Dr. Wellesley—in fact, I am very much surprised that they have not gone to the length of arresting him. Perhaps that's a card which Superintendent Hawthwaite still keeps up his sleeve. I may tell him, on behalf of my client, that he's quite welcome to arrest Dr. Wellesley and bring him before the magistrates whenever he likes; but as Dr. Wellesley's name has been very freely mentioned this morning, I think it would be only fair, sir, that he should be allowed to go into that box at once, where he will give evidence on oath—"

"If Dr. Wellesley elects to go into the box," interrupted the coroner, "I shall, of course, warn him in the usual way, Mr. Cotman. He is not bound to give any evidence that might incriminate himself; but no doubt you have already made him aware of that."

"Dr. Wellesley is very well aware of it, sir," replied Cotman. "I ask that he should be allowed to give evidence at once."

"Let Dr. Wellesley be called, then," said the coroner.

Brent inspected Wellesley closely as the surgeon stepped into the witness box. He was a well set up, handsome man, noted in the town for his correct and fashionable attire, and he made quite a distinguished figure as the center of these somewhat sordid surroundings.

That he was indignant was very obvious. He answered the preliminary questions impatiently. There was impatience, too, in his manner, as, after taking the oath, he turned to the coroner. It seemed to Brent that Wellesley's notion was that the point-blank denial of a man of honor was enough to dispose of any charge.

This time the coroner went to work himself, quietly and confidentially.

"Dr. Wellesley," he began, leaning over his desk, "I need not warn you in the way I mentioned just now. I'm sure you quite understand the position. As you have been in court all the morning, you have heard the evidence that has already offered itself. As regards the evidence given by your assistant, Dr. Carstairs, as to your absence from the surgery between seven thirty and seven forty-nine—is that correct?"

Wellesley drew himself to his full height, and spoke with emphasis.

"Absolutely!"

"And the evidence of the young woman, your housemaid? Is she correct in what she told us?"

"Quite!"

The coroner looked down at his papers, his spectacled eyes wandering about them as if in search of something. Suddenly he looked up.

"There's this matter of the handkerchief, or portion of a handkerchief," he said. "It was picked up, we are told, from the hearth in the mayor's parlor, where the rest of it had been burned. Did you hear Mrs. Marriner's evidence about that, Dr. Wellesley?"

"I did."

"Is what she said, or suggested, correct? Is the handkerchief yours?"

"I have never seen the handkerchief—or, rather, the remains of it. I heard that some portion of a handkerchief, charred and blood-stained, was found lying on the hearth in the mayor's parlor, and that it had been handed over to Superintendent Hawthwaite, but I have not had it shown to me."

The coroner glanced at Hawthwaite, who, since the opening of the court, had sat near Meeking, occasionally exchanging whispered remarks.

"Let Dr. Wellesley see that fragment," he said.

All eyes were fixed on the witness as he took the piece of charred and faintly stained stuff in his hands, and examined it. Everybody knew that the stain was from the blood of the murdered man. The same thought was in everybody's mind—was that stain now being critically inspected by the actual murderer?

Wellesley suddenly looked up. At the same time he handed back the fragment to the policeman who had passed it to him.

"To the best of my belief," he said, turning to the coroner, "that is part of a handkerchief of mine. The handkerchief was one of a dozen which I bought in Paris about a year ago."

A murmur ran round the crowded court at this candid avowal. As it died away, the coroner again spoke.

"Had you missed this handkerchief?"

"I had not. I have a drawer in my dressing room full of handkerchiefs—several dozens of them; but I am positive, from the texture, that that is mine."

"Very well!" said the coroner. "Now, about the evidence of Mr. Walkershaw. Did you know of the door between your house and the Moot Hall?"

"Yes, and so did the late mayor. As a matter of fact, he and I, some time ago, had it put to rights. We both used it—I, to go into the Moot Hall; he, to come and see me."

"There was no secrecy about it, then?"

"Not between Wallingford and myself, at any rate."

The coroner took off his spectacles and leaned back in his chair—a sure sign that he had finished his questions. Meeking rose, cool, level-voiced.

"Dr. Wellesley, I think you heard the evidence of Mrs. Saumarez?"

But before Dr. Wellesley could make answer, the other doctors present in the court room were suddenly called into action. As the barrister pronounced her name, Mrs. Saumarez collapsed in her seat, fainting.

XVII

In the midst of the commotion that followed, and while Mrs. Saumarez, attended by the doctors, was being carried out of the court room, Tansley, at Brent's elbow, drew in his breath with a sharp sibilant sound that came near being a whistle. Brent turned from the withdrawing figures to look at him questioningly.

"Well?" he said.

"Queer!" muttered Tansley. "Why should she faint? I wonder—"

"What?" demanded Brent, as the solicitor paused.

"I'm wondering if she and Wellesley know anything that they're keeping to themselves," said Tansley. "She was obviously nervous and frightened when she was in that box just now."

"She's a nervous, highly strung woman, I should say, from what I've seen of her," remarked Brent. "Excitable!"

"Well, he's cool enough," said Tansley, nodding toward the witness box. "Hasn't turned a hair! Meeking will get nothing out of him!"

The barrister was again addressing himself to Wellesley, who, after one glance at Mrs. Saumarez as she fainted, had remained erect and defiant, facing the court.

"You heard Mrs. Saumarez's evidence just now, Dr. Wellesley?" asked Meeking quietly.

"I did."

"Was it correct?"

"I am not going to discuss it."

"Nor answer any questions arising out of it?"

"I am not."

"Perhaps you will answer some questions of mine. Was there any jealousy existing between you and the late John Wallingford, of which Mrs. Saumarez was the cause?"

Wellesley hesitated, taking a full minute for consideration.

"I will answer that to a certain extent," he replied at last. "At the time of his death, no—none!"

"Had there been any previously?"

"At one time—yes. It was over."

"You and he were good friends?"

"Absolutely, both in private and public—I mean in public affairs. I was in complete touch and sympathy with him as regards his public work."

"Now, Dr. Wellesley, I think that for your own sake you ought to give us some information on one or two points. Mrs. Saumarez said on oath that you asked her to marry you, two or three times. She also said that the late mayor asked her, too. Now—"

Wellesley suddenly brought down his hand on the ledge of the witness box.

"I have already told you, sir, that I am not going to discuss my affairs with Mrs. Saumarez, or with the late mayor in relation to Mrs. Saumarez!" he exclaimed, with some show of anger. "They are private, and have nothing to do with this inquiry. I shall not answer any question relating to them."

"In that case, Dr. Wellesley, you will lay yourself open to whatever conclusions the jury may choose to make," said Meeking. "We have already heard Mrs. Saumarez say—what she did say; but as you won't answer, I will pass to another matter. You have already told us that the evidence of your assistant, Dr. Carstairs, is correct as to your movements between half past seven and eleven minutes to eight—or, rather, as to your absence from the surgery during those nineteen minutes. You adhere to that?"

"Certainly. Carstairs is quite correct."

"Very well! Where were you during that time—nineteen minutes?"

"For most of the time, I was in my drawing-room."

"What do you mean by 'most of the time'?"

"Well, I should say three-quarters of it."

"And the other quarter?"

"Spent in letting a caller in and letting that caller out."

"By your front door?"

"No, by a side door—a private door."

"You took this caller to your drawing-room, then?"

"Yes."

"For a private interview?"

"Precisely."

Meeking allowed a minute to elapse, during which he affected to be looking at his papers. Suddenly he turned full on his witness.

"Who was the caller?"

Wellesley drew his tall figure still more erect.

"I refuse to say."

"Why?"

"Because I am not going to drag in the name of my caller. The business my caller came upon was of a very private and confidential nature, and I am not going to break my rule of professional silence. I shall not give the name."

Meeking again paused. Finally, with a glance at the coroner, he turned to the witness and began to speak more earnestly.

"Let me put this to you," he said. "Consider calmly, if you please, what we have heard from previous witnesses, and what you yourself have admitted. Mrs. Saumarez has sworn that you and the late mayor were rivals for her hand, and that there was jealousy between you. You admit that Mrs. Marriner is correct in identifying the burned and blood-stained fragment of handkerchief found in the mayor's parlor after the murder as your property. You also acknowledge the existence of a door communicating between your house and the Moot Hall. You admit that you were away from your surgery for nineteen minutes at the very time when the murder was committed, according to the medical evidence. You admit that you were in your drawing-room, from an inner room of which the door I have just referred to opens. Now I suggest to you, Dr. Wellesley, that you should give us the name of the person who was with you in your drawing-room."

Wellesley, who, during this exordium, had steadily watched his questioner, shook his head more decidedly than before.

"No!" he answered promptly. "I shall not say who my caller was."

Meeking spread out his hands in a gesture of helplessness. He turned to the coroner, who, for the last few minutes, had shown signs of being ill at ease, and had frequently shaken his head at Wellesley's point-blank refusals.

"I don't know if it is any use appealing to you, sir," said Meeking. "The witness is—"

The coroner leaned toward Wellesley, his whole attitude placatory and inviting.

"I really think that it would be better, doctor, if you could find it in your way to answer Mr. Meeking's question."

"I have answered it, sir," interrupted Wellesley. "My answer is—no!"

"Yes, yes, but I don't want the jury to get any false impressions — to draw any wrong conclusions," said the coroner, a little testily. "I feel sure that in your own interest—"

"I am not thinking of my own interest," declared Wellesley. "Once again, I shall not give the name of my caller."

There was a further pause, during which Meeking and the coroner exchanged glances. Then the lawyer suddenly turned again to the witness box.

"Was your caller a man or a woman?" he asked.

"That I shan't say," answered Wellesley steadily.

"Who admitted him—or her?"

"I did."

"How? By what door of your house?"

"By the side door in Piper's Passage."

"Did any of your servants see the caller at the door?"

"No."

"How came that about? You have several servants."

"My caller came to that door by arrangement with myself at a certain time—seven thirty — was admitted by me, and taken straight up to my drawing-room by a side staircase. My caller left, when the interview was over, by the same way."

"The interview, then, was a secret one?"

"Precisely. It was secret — private—confidential."

"And you flatly refuse to give us the caller's name?"

"Flatly."

Meeking hesitated a moment. Then, with a sudden gesture, as if he washed his hands of the whole episode, he dropped back into his seat, bundled his papers together, and made some evidently cynical remark to Hawthwaite, who sat near to him.

Hawthwaite made no response. He was watching the coroner, and in answer to a questioning glance he shook his head.

"No more evidence," whispered Tansley to Brent, as Wellesley, dismissed, stepped down from the witness box. "Whew! This is a queer business, and our non-responsive medical friend may come to rue his obstinacy. I wonder what old Seagrave will make of it! He'll have to sum it all up now."

XVIII

The coroner was already turning to the jury. He began with his notes of the first day's proceedings, and spent some time over them; but eventually he told his listeners that all that had transpired in the opening stages of the inquiry faded into comparative insignificance when viewed in the light of the evidence they had heard that morning. He analyzed that evidence with the acumen of the shrewd old lawyer that everybody knew him to be.

At last he got to what the sharper intellects among his hearers felt, with him, to be the crux of the situation—was there jealousy of an appreciable nature between Wallingford and Wellesley in respect to Mrs. Saumarez? If there was — and he rather cavalierly brushed aside Wellesley's denial that it existed at the time of Wallingford's death, estimating that denial lightly in face of the fact that its cause was still there, and that Wellesley had admitted that it had existed at one time—then the evidence, as they had it, clearly showed that between seven thirty and seven forty-nine on the evening of the late mayor's death, Wellesley had ready and easy means of access to the mayor's parlor.

Something might have occurred, the coroner suggested, which had revivified the old jealousy. There might have been a sudden scene, a quarrel, high words. It was a pity, a thousand pities, that Dr. Wellesley refused to give the name of the person who, according to his story, was with him during the nineteen minutes' interval which—

"Going dead against him!" whispered Tansley to Brent. "The old chap's taken Meeking's job out of his hands. Good thing this is a coroner's court. If a judge said as much as Seagrave's saying to an assize jury, Wellesley would hang! Look at those jurymen—they're half dead certain that Wellesley's guilty already!"

"Well," muttered Brent, "I'm not so far off that stage myself. Why didn't he speak out, and be done with it? There's been more in that love affair than I guessed at, Tansley—that's where it is. The woman's anxious enough, anyway—look at her!"

Mrs. Saumarez had come back into court. She looked very pale, and was evidently under great excitement. It seemed to Brent that she was almost holding her breath as the old coroner, in his slow, carefully measured accents and phrases, went on piling up the damning conclusions that might be drawn against Wellesley.

"You must not allow yourselves to forget, gentlemen," he was saying, "that Dr. Wellesley's assertion that he was busy with a caller during the fateful nineteen minutes is wholly uncorroborated. There are several domestic servants in his establishment—four or five, I think. There was also his assistant in the house, and there were patients going in and out of the surgery, but no one has been brought forward to prove that he was engaged with a visitor in his drawing-room. Now you are only concerned with the evidence that has been put before you, and I am bound to tell you that there is no evidence that Dr. Wellesley had any caller—"

A woman's voice suddenly rang out, clear and sharp, from a point of the audience immediately facing the coroner.

"He had! I was the caller!"

In the excitement of the moment, Tansley sprang to his feet, stared, and sank back again.

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "Mrs. Mallett! Whew!"

Brent, too, got up and looked. He saw a handsome, determined-looking woman standing amid the closely packed spectators. Mallett, the bank manager, sat by her side. He was evidently struck dumb with sudden amazement, and was staring open-mouthed at her. On the other side, two or three men and women, evidently friends, were expostulating with the interrupter; but Mrs. Mallett was oblivious of her husband's wonder and her friends' entreaties. Confronting the coroner, she spoke again.

"Mr. Seagrave, I am the person who called on Dr. Wellesley!" she said in a loud, clear voice. "I was there all the time you're discussing, and if you'll let me give evidence, you shall have it on my oath. I am not going to sit here and hear an innocent man traduced for lack of a word of mine."

The coroner, who looked none too well pleased at this interruption, motioned Mrs. Mallett to come forward. He impatiently waved aside a protest from Wellesley, who seemed to be begging this voluntary witness to go back to her seat and say nothing. Then, as Mrs. Mallett entered the witness box, Seagrave turned to Meeking.

"Perhaps you'll be good enough to examine this witness," he said, a little irritably. "These irregular interruptions—but let her say what she has to say."

Mrs. Mallett, in Brent's opinion, looked precisely the sort of lady to have her say, and to have it right out. She was calm enough now, and, when she had taken the oath and told her questioner formally who she was, she faced him with equanimity. Meeking, somewhat uncertain of his ground, took his cue from the witness's dramatic intervention.

"Mrs. Mallett, did you call on Dr. Wellesley at seven thirty on the evening in question—the evening on which Mr. Wallingford met his death?"

"I did."

"By arrangement?"

"Certainly—by arrangement."

"When was the arrangement made?"

"That afternoon. Dr. Wellesley and I met in the Market Place, about four o'clock. We made it then."

"Was the interview to be a strictly private one?"

"Yes, it was. That was why I went to the side door in Piper's Passage."

"Did Dr. Wellesley admit you to the house himself?"

"Yes, he did, and he took me straight up to his drawing-room by a side staircase."

"No one saw you going in?"

"No—nor leaving, either."

"Why all this privacy, Mrs. Mallett?"

"My business was of a private sort, sir."

"Will you tell us what it was?"

"I will tell you that I had reasons of my own—my particular own—for seeing Dr. Wellesley and the mayor."

"The mayor! Did you see the mayor—there?"

"No. I meant to see him, but I didn't."

"Do you mean that you expected to meet him there—in Dr. Wellesley's drawing-room?"

"No. Dr. Wellesley had told me of the door between his house and the Moot Hall, and he said that after he and I had had our talk, I could go through that door to the mayor's parlor, where I should be sure to find Mr. Wallingford at that time."

"I see! Did you go to see the late Mr. Wallingford?"

"I did."

"After talking with Dr. Wellesley?"

"Yes. He showed me the way, and opened the door for me—"

"Stay—what time would that be?"

"About seven thirty-five or so. I went along the passage to the mayor's parlor, but I never entered."

"Never entered! And why, now, Mrs. Mallett?"

"Because, as I reached the door, I heard people talking inside the room; so I went back the way I came."

XIX

Meeking, who, by long experience, knew the value of dramatic effect in the examination of witnesses, took full advantage of Mrs. Mallett's strange and unexpected announcement. He paused, staring at her. He knew well enough that when he stared, other folk would stare, too.

So for a full moment the situation rested. There stood Mrs. Mallett, resolute and unmoved, in the box, with every eye in the crowded court fixed full upon her, and Meeking still gazing at her intently—and, of set purpose, half incredulously. There was something intentionally skeptical and cynical in his tone, when at last he spoke.

"Do you say—on oath—that you went through the door between Dr. Wellesley's house and Moot Hall, to the mayor's parlor, that evening?"

"To the door of the mayor's parlor," corrected Mrs. Mallett. "Yes—I do—I did."

"Was the door closed?"

"The door was closed."

"But you say you heard voices?"

"I heard voices within."

"Whose voices?"

"That I can't say. I couldn't distinguish them."

"Did you hear the mayor's voice?"

"I tell you I couldn't distinguish any voice. There were two people talking inside the mayor's parlor, anyway, in loud voices. It seemed to me that they were both talking at the same time. In fact, I thought—"

"What did you think?" demanded Meeking, as Mrs. Mallett paused.

"Well, I thought that, whoever they were, the two people were quarreling. The voices were loud — lifted — angry, I thought."

"And yet you couldn't distinguish them?"

"No, I couldn't. I might have recognized the mayor's voice, perhaps, if I'd gone closer to the door and listened, but I didn't stay. As soon as I heard what I have told you of, I went straight back."

"By the same way—to Dr. Wellesley's drawing-room?"

"Yes."

"What happened then?"

"I told Dr. Wellesley that the mayor had somebody with him, and that they appeared to be having high words. As I didn't want to wait, he suggested that I should come again next evening. Then I went home."

"In the same way—by the private door into Piper's Passage?"

"Exactly."

"Did Dr. Wellesley go downstairs with you and let you out?"

"He did."

"See anybody about on that occasion?"

"No—no one."

Meeking paused. After a glance around the table at which he was standing, he looked at his notes.

"Now, Mrs. Mallett," he said presently, "what time was this—I mean, when you left Dr. Wellesley's?"

"A little before a quarter to eight. The clock struck the quarter just after I got into my own house."

"Where is your house?"

"Next door to the Moot Hall. Dr. Wellesley's house is on one side of the Moot Hall; ours is on the other."

"It would take you a very short time, then, to go home?"

"A minute or two."

"Very well! And you went to Dr. Wellesley's at seven thirty?"

"Just about that."

"Then you were with him most of the time you were there—in his drawing-room?"

"Certainly—all the time, except for the two or three minutes I spent in going to the mayor's parlor."

"Talking to Dr. Wellesley?"

"Of course! What do you suppose I went for?"

"That's just what I want to find out," retorted Meeking, with a glance that took in the audience, now all agog with excitement. "Will you tell us, Mrs. Mallett?"

Mrs. Mallett's handsome face became rigid, and her well cut lips fixed themselves in a straight line; but she relaxed them to rap out one word.

"No!"

"Come now, Mrs. Mallett—this is a serious, a very serious inquiry. It is becoming more serious as it becomes increasingly mysterious. You have already told us that you went, secretly, to Dr. Wellesley's house in order that you might see him and, afterward, the mayor, Mr. Wallingford. Now you must have had some very special reason, or cause, for these interviews. What was it, Mrs. Mallett?"

"No! That's my business — nobody else's. I shall not say."

"Does Dr. Wellesley know what it was?"

"Of course!"

"Would the mayor have known, if you had seen him?"

"Considering that that was the object I had in wanting to see him, of course he would," retorted Mrs. Mallett. "I should think that's obvious."

"But you didn't see him, eh?"

"You know very well I didn't."

"Pardon me, madam," said Meeking, with lightninglike promptitude, "but I don't know anything of the sort. However, does any one else know of this—business?"

"That, too, is my concern," declared Mrs. Mallett, who had bridled indignantly at the barrister's swift reply. "I shan't say."

"Does your husband know of it?"

"I'm not going to say that, either."

"Did your husband—who, I believe, is one of the town trustees—did he know of your visit to Dr. Wellesley's house on this particular occasion?"

"I'll answer that. He did not."

"Where was he, while you were at Dr. Wellesley's? Had you left him at home?"

"No—he had gone out before I went out myself. As to where he was, I should say he was either at the Conservative Club or at Mr. Simon Crood's. Is it relevant?"

Amid a ripple of laughter, Meeking made a gesture which signified that he had done with Mrs. Mallett, and she presently stepped down from the witness box.

Meeking turned to the coroner.

"I want to have Dr. Wellesley in that box again, sir," he said.

"Let Dr. Wellesley be recalled," commanded the coroner.

Wellesley, once more in the full gaze of the court, looked vexed and impatient. Those who had occasionally glanced at him while Mrs. Mallett was giving her evidence had observed that he showed signs of being by no means pleased at the turn things had taken since her sudden intervention. Sometimes he had frowned; once or twice he had muttered to himself. He looked blackly at Meeking as the barrister once more confronted him.

"You have heard the evidence of the last witness?" Meeking asked abruptly.

"All of it," replied Wellesley.

"Is it correct as to details of time?"

"So far as I recollect, quite."

"When Mrs. Mallett went by the private door between your drawing-room and the Moot Hall, to see the mayor, what did you do?"

"Waited for her in my drawing-room."

"How long was she away?"

"Four or five minutes, perhaps."

"Had you made any appointment with the mayor on her behalf?"

"No, I had not."

"You sent her to see him on the chance of her finding him there—in the mayor's parlor?"

"There was no chance about it. I knew, as a good many other people did, that Wallingford spent almost every evening in the mayor's parlor."

"Had you ever visited him there during these evening attendances of his?"

"Oh, yes—several times."

"By this communicating door?"

"Certainly; and he had made use of it in coming to see me."

"Do you know what the mayor was doing on these occasions? I mean, do you know why he spent so much time at the mayor's parlor of an evening?"

"Yes—he was going into the financial affairs of the borough."

"Now I want to put a very particular question to you, with the object of getting at some solution of this mystery. What was Mrs. Mallett's business with you and the mayor?"

"I cannot reply to that."

"You won't give me an answer?"

"I won't."

"Do you base your refusal on professional privilege, doctor?'

"No, not at all. Mrs. Mallett's business was of an absolutely private nature. It had nothing whatever to do with the subject of this inquiry. I tell you that on my honor—on my oath—nothing whatever."

"You mean, not directly?"

Meeking threw a good deal of significance into this question, which he put slowly, and with a peculiarly meaning glance at his witness; but Wellesley either did not see, or affected not to see, any special significance, and his answer came promptly.

"I mean precisely what I say, as I always do."

Meeking leaned across the table, eying Wellesley still more closely.

"Do you think, knowing all that you do now, that it had anything to do with it indirectly—*indirectly?*"

Self-controlled though he was, Wellesley could not repress a start of surprise at this question. It was obviously unexpected. It seemed to those who, like Brent and Tansley, were watching him narrowly, that he was considerably taken aback by it. He hesitated.

"I want an answer to that," said Meeking, after a pause.

"Well," replied Wellesley at last, "I can't say. What I mean by that is that I am not in a position to say. I am not sufficiently acquainted with—let me call them facts—to be able to say. What I do say is that Mrs. Mallett's business with me and with Wallingford, that evening, was of an essentially private nature, and had nothing whatever to do with what happened in the mayor's parlor just about the time she was in my drawing-room."

"That is, as far as you are aware?"

"As far as I am aware—yes; but—I am quite sure it hadn't."

"You can't give the court any further information that would help to solve this problem?"

"I cannot."

"Well, a question or two more. When Mrs. Mallett left you at your door in Piper's Passage—I mean, when you let her out, just before a quarter to eight—what did you do next?"

"I went upstairs again to my drawing-room."

"May I ask why?"

"Yes. I thought of going to see Wallingford, in the mayor's parlor."

"Did you go?"

"No. I should have gone, but I suddenly remembered that I had an appointment with a patient in Meadow Gate at ten minutes to eight o'clock; so I went back to the surgery, exchanged my jacket for a coat, and went out."

"On your oath, have you the slightest idea who killed John Wallingford?"

"I have not the least idea. I never have had."

Meeking nodded, as much as to imply that he had no further questions to ask. When his witness had stepped down, he turned to the coroner.

"I should like to have Bunning, the caretaker, recalled, sir," he said. "I want to ask him certain questions which have just occurred to me. Bunning," he continued, when the ex-sergeant had been summoned to the witness box, "I want you to give me some information about the relation of your rooms to the upper portion of the Moot Hall. You live in rooms on the ground floor, don't you? Yes? Very well, now—is there any entrance to your rooms other than that at the front of the building—the entrance from the Market Place?"

"Yes, sir—there's an entrance from St. Laurence Lane, at the back."

"Is there any way from your rooms to the upper floors of the Moot Hall?"

"Yes, sir—there's a back stair, from our back door."

"Could anybody reach the mayor's parlor by that stair?"

"They could, sir, certainly; but either I or my wife would see them."

"Just so—if you were in your rooms; but you told us in your first evidence that from about seven twenty or so until eight o'clock you were smoking your pipe at the Market Place entrance to the Moot Hall, where, of course, you couldn't see your back door. That correct? Very well! Now, while you were at the front, was your wife in your rooms at the back?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know what she was doing?"

"I do, sir. She was getting our supper ready."

"Are you sure she never left the house—your rooms, you know?"

Bunning started. Obviously, a new idea had occurred to him.

"Aye!" said Meeking, with a smile. "Just so, Bunning. You're not sure?"

"Well, sir," replied Bunning slowly, "now that I come to think of it, I'm not. I never thought of it before, but during that time my missis may have been out of the place for a few minutes or so, to fetch the supper beer, sir."

"To be sure! Now where does Mrs. Bunning get your supper beer?"

"At the Chancellor Vaults, sir—around the corner."

Meeking turned quietly to the coroner.

"I think we ought to have Mrs. Bunning's evidence," he remarked.

It took ten minutes to fetch Mrs. Bunning from her rooms in the lower regions of the old Moot Hall. She came at last, breathless, and in her working attire, and turned a wondering, good-natured face on the barrister.

"Just a little question or two, Mrs. Bunning," he said, in a tone of indifference. "On the evening of the late mayor's death, did you go out to the Chancellor Vaults to fetch your supper beer?"

"I did, sir—just as usual."

"What time?"

"A bit earlier than usual, sir—half past seven."

"How long were you away?"

"Why, sir, to tell you the truth, nigh on to half an hour. I met a neighbor at the corner, and—"

"Exactly—and you stopped, chatting a bit. So you were out of your rooms in the Moot Hall that evening from seven thirty to nearly eight o'clock?"

"Yes, sir."

Meeking gave the coroner a glance, thrust his hands into his pockets, and dropped back into his seat, silent and apparently satisfied.

XX

If the barrister was satisfied with the possibilities suggested by this new evidence, the gist of which had apparently altered the whole aspect of the case, the coroner obviously was not.

Ever since Mrs. Mallett had interrupted his address to the jury, he had shown signs of fidgetiness. He had continually put on and taken off his spectacles. He had moved restlessly in his chair. Now and then he had seemed on the point of interrupting counsel or witnesses. It was evident that things were not at all to his liking. Now, as Meeking sat down, the coroner turned to Mrs. Bunning, who stood, looking wonderingly about her, and still fingering the apron in which she had been found at her work.

"Mrs. Bunning," he said, "I want to ask you some questions about this back entrance of yours. What is it—a door opening out of the rear of the Moot Hall?"

"Yes, sir—that's it, sir."

"Does it open on St. Laurence Lane?"

"Yes, sir."

"What does it open into—a hall, a lobby, a passage, or what?"

"A lobby, sir, next to our living room."

"Is there a staircase, then, in that lobby, by which you can get to the upper rooms in the Moot Hall?"

"Yes, sir—that's the staircase we use, me and my husband, when we go up for cleaning and dusting, sir."

"Then, if anybody went in by that door while you were out that evening, whoever it was could go up that staircase to the upper rooms?"

"Yes, sir, they could."

"And get to the mayor's parlor?"

"Yes, sir. The staircase leads to the big landing, sir, and the door of the mayor's parlor is at the far end of it."

"And you were out of your rooms for half an hour that evening?"

"Just about that, sir. It would be a bit after half past seven when I went out, and it was just before eight when I went in again."

"Did you notice anything that made you think somebody had been in?"

"No, sir—nothing."

"Had you left your door open—your outer door?"

"Yes, sir, a bit ajar. Of course, I never thought to be away from the house for many minutes, sir."

"Very good! That's all, thank you, Mrs. Bunning," said the coroner. He looked around the court. "Is the borough surveyor still there?" he asked. "If so, let him come into the witness box again."

But Walkershaw had gone, nor was he to be found in his office in another part of the building. Once more the coroner looked around.

"I dare say we are all familiar with what I may call the geography of St. Laurence Lane," he remarked; "but I want some formal evidence about it that can be put on the record. I see Mr. Krevin Crood there. I believe Mr. Crood is as good an authority on Hathelsborough as anybody living. Perhaps he'll oblige me by coming forward."

Krevin Crood, sitting at the front of the densely packed mass of spectators, rose and walked into the witness box. The coroner leaned confidentially in his direction.

"Mr. Crood," he said, "I believe you are familiar with St. Laurence Lane, in its relation to the immediately surrounding property?"

"I am, sir," replied Krevin. "I am familiar with every inch of it."

"Just describe it to us, as if we knew nothing about it," continued the coroner. "You know what I mean."

"Certainly, sir," assented Krevin. "St. Laurence Lane is a narrow thoroughfare, about eighty to ninety yards in length, which lies at the back of Mr. Mallett's house — I mean the bank premises — the Moot Hall, and Dr. Wellesley's house. Its north entrance, at the corner of the bank, is in Woolmarket; its south in Strand Lane. On its west side there is a back door to the bank house; another into Bunning's rooms in the basement of the Moot Hall; a third into the police office, also in that basement; a fourth into the rear of Dr. Wellesley's house. On the opposite side of the lane—the east — there is nothing but St. Laurence's Church and churchyard. St. Laurence's church tower and west end face the back of the Moot Hall. There is a part of the churchyard opposite the bank premises—the rear premises. The rest of the churchyard faces Dr. Wellesley's house—the back of it, of course."

"Is the lane much frequented?"

"No, sir—it is very little used. Except by tradesmen going to Mr. Mallett's and Dr. Wellesley's back doors, and by people going to the police office, it is scarcely used at all. There is no traffic along it. On Sundays, of course, it is used by people going to the services at St. Laurence's."

"Would it be likely to be quiet—unfrequented—of an evening?"

"Emphatically yes."

"Do you think it likely that any person wishing to enter the Moot Hall unobserved, and seeing Mrs. Bunning go away from her rooms and around the corner to the Chancellor Vaults—as we've just heard she did—could slip in unseen?"

"Oh, to be sure!" affirmed Krevin. "The easiest thing in the world! If I may suggest something—"

"Go on! Go on!" said the coroner, waving his spectacles. "Anything that helps—suggest whatever you like."

"Well," said Krevin slowly and thoughtfully, "if I may put it in my own way, suppose that there is somebody in the town who is desirous of finding the late mayor alone in the mayor's parlor, being cognizant of the fact, well known to many people, that the late Mr. Wallingford was to be found there every evening. Suppose, too, that that person was well acquainted with the geography of St. Laurence Lane and the Moot Hall. Suppose, further, that he or she was also familiar with the fact that Mrs. Bunning invariably went out every evening to fetch the supper beer from the Chancellor Vaults. Such a person could easily enter the Bunnings' back door with an absolutely minimum risk of detection. The churchyard of St. Laurence is edged with thick shrubs and trees. Anybody could easily hide among the shrubs—laurel, myrtle, ivy—watch for Mrs. Bunning's going out, and, when she had gone, slip across the narrow lane and enter the door which, as she says, she left open. It would not take two minutes for any person who knew the place to pass from the churchyard to the mayor's parlor, or from the mayor's parlor to the churchyard."

A murmur of comprehension and understanding ran around the court. Most of the people present knew St. Laurence Lane and the Moot Hall as well as Krevin Crood knew them, and his suggestion appealed to their common sense.

Tansley, with a sudden start, turned to Brent.

"That's done it!" he whispered. "Everybody tumbles to that! We've been going off on all sorts of side tracks all the morning—now Wellesley, now Mrs. Mallett, and now here's another! Access to the mayor's parlor—there you are! Easy as winking, on Krevin Crood's theory.

Lay you a fiver to a shilling old Seagrave won't go any further!"

Herein Tansley was quickly proved to be right. The coroner was showing unmistakable symptoms of his satiety for the time being. He thanked Krevin Crood punctiliously for his assistance, and, once again toying restlessly with his spectacles, turned to the jury, who, on their part, looked blank and doubtful.

"Well, gentlemen!" he said. "It seems to me that the entire complexion of this matter is changed by the evidence we have heard since Mrs. Mallett broke in so unexpectedly upon what I was saying to you. I don't propose now to say any more as regards the evidence of either Dr. Wellesley or Mrs. Mallett. Since we heard what they had to say we have learned a good deal, which I think will be found to have more importance than we attach to it at present. As matters stand, the evidence of Mrs. Bunning is of supreme importance. There is no doubt whatever that there was easy means of access to the mayor's parlor during that half hour wherein the mayor met his death. The mystery of the whole affair has deepened considerably during to-day's proceedings. Instead of attempting to bring this inquiry to a definite conclusion, I feel that I must wait for more evidence. I adjourn this inquest for a month from to-day."

The court cleared. The spectators filtered out into the Market Place in various moods, and under different degrees of excitement. Some were openly disappointed that the jury had not been allowed to return a verdict. Some were vehement in declaring that the jury never would return a verdict. Here and there were men who wagged their heads sagely, and remarked with sinister smiles that they knew what they thought about it.

Within the rapidly emptying court, Brent, Tansley, and Hawthwaite were grouped around Meeking. The barrister was indulging in some private remarks upon the morning's proceedings, chiefly addressed to the police superintendent.

"There's no doubt about it, you know," he was saying. "The evidence of the Bunning woman, supplemented by what Krevin Crood said — which was merely a formal crystallizing of common knowledge — has altered the whole thing. Here's the back entrance to the Moot Hall left absolutely unprotected, unguarded, unwatched, or whatever you like to call it, for half an hour —the critical half hour. Of course, the murderer got up to the mayor's parlor that way, and got away by the same means. You're as far off as ever, Hawthwaite! It's a pity you wasted time on that jealousy business. I watched Wellesley closely, and I believe he spoke the truth when he said that whatever there might have been, there was no jealousy about Mrs. Saumarez between him and Wallingford at the end. My own impression is that Wellesley was clear off with the lady."

Hawthwaite, essentially a man of fixed ideas, looked sullen.

"Well, it isn't mine, then," he growled. "From all I've learned—and I've chances and opportunities that most folks haven't —my impression is that both men were after her, right up to the time Wallingford was murdered. I can tell you this, and I could have put it in evidence if I'd thought it worth while—Wellesley used to go and see her of an evening, constantly, up to a very recent date, though she was supposed to have broken off with him and to be on with the mayor. Now then!"

"Do you know that for a fact, Hawthwaite?" asked Tansley.

"I know it for a fact. He used to go there at night, and stop late. If you want to know where I got it from, it was from a young woman that used to be housemaid at the Abbey House, Mrs. Saumarez's place. She's told me a lot. Both Wallingford and Wellesley used to visit there a good deal, but, as I say, Wellesley used to be there very late of an evening. This young woman says she knows for a fact that he was often with her mistress till close on midnight. I don't care twopence what Wellesley said—I believe he was, and is, after her, and of course he'd be jealous enough about her being so friendly with Wallingford. There's a deal more in all this than's come out yet—let me tell you that!"

"I don't think anybody will contradict you, Hawthwaite," observed the barrister dryly; "but the pertinent fact is what I tell you—the fact of access. Somebody got to the mayor's parlor by way of the back stair, through Bunning's rooms, that evening. Who was it? That's what you've got to find out. If only you had found out, before now, that Mrs. Bunning took half an hour to fetch the supper beer that night, we should have been spared a lot of talk this morning. As things are, we're as wise as ever."

Then Meeking, with a cynical laugh, picked up his papers and went off. Brent, leaving Tansley talking to the superintendent, who was inclined to be huffy, strolled out of the Moot Hall and went around to the back, with the idea of seeing for himself the narrow street which Krevin Crood had formally described.

He saw at once that Krevin was an admirable exponent of the art of description. Everything in St. Laurence Lane was precisely as the former town clerk had said. There was the door into the Bunnings' rooms, and there, facing it, the ancient church and its equally ancient churchyard.

It was to the churchyard that Brent gave most attention. He immediately realized that Krevin Crood was quite right in speaking of it as a place wherein anybody could conveniently hide—a dark, gloomy, sheltered, high-walled place, filled with thick shrubbery, out of which, here and there, grew somber yew trees, some of them of an antiquity as venerable as that of the church itself. It would be a very easy thing indeed, Brent decided, for any designing person to hide among these trees and shrubs, to watch the Bunnings' door until Mrs. Bunning left it, jug in hand, and then to slip across the grass-grown, cobble-paved lane, silent and lonely enough, and up to the mayor's parlor. But—all that presupposed knowledge of the place, and of its people and their movements.

Brent went back to the Market Place and toward the Chancellor. As he turned into the hotel, Peppermore came hurrying out of it. He carried a folded paper in his hand, and he waved it at Brent, who, at sight of the newspaper man, came to a sudden halt.

"Just been looking for you, Mr. Brent!" Peppermore said mysteriously. "Come into some quiet spot, sir, and glance at this. Here we are, sir—corner of the hall."

He drew Brent into an alcove that opened close by them, and, affecting a mysterious air, began to unfold his paper—a sheet of news print which, as Brent's professional eye was quick to see, had just been pulled as a proof.

"All that affair to-day, Mr. Brent," he whispered, "was most unsatisfactory, sir, most unsatisfactory—unconvincing, inconclusive, Mr. Brent. The thing's getting no further, sir, no further—except, of course, for the very pertinent fact about Mrs. Bunning's absence from her quarters that fateful evening. My own impression, sir, is that Hawthwaite and all the rest of 'em don't know the right way of going about this business. The *Monitor* is going to wade in, sir! The *Monitor* is coming to the rescue! Look here, sir—we're going to publish a special edition to-night, with a full account of to-day's proceedings at the inquest, and with it we're going to give away, as a free, gratis supplement—what do you think, sir? This — produced at great cost, sir, in the interest of justice! Look at it!"

Therewith Peppermore, first convincing himself that he and his companion were secure from observation, spread out before Brent a square sheet of very damp paper, strongly redolent of printers' ink, at the head of which appeared, in big, bold, black characters, the question:

WHO TYPED THIS LETTER?

Beneath it, excellently reproduced, was a facsimile of the typewritten letter which Wallingford had shown to Epplewhite and afterward left in his keeping; and beneath that was a note in large italics inviting any one who could give any information as to the origin of the document to communicate at once with the editor of the *Monitor*.

"What d'ye think of that for a *coup*, Mr. Brent?" proudly demanded Peppermore. "Up to Fleet Street form, that, sir, ain't it? I borrowed the original, sir, had it carefully reproduced in facsimile, and persuaded my proprietor to go to the expense of having sufficient copies struck off on this specially prepared paper, to give one away with every copy of the *Monitor* that we shall print to-night. Five thousand copies, Mr. Brent! That facsimile, sir, will be all over Hathelsborough by supper time!"

"Smart!" observed Brent. "Top-hole idea, Peppermore! And you hope—"

"There aren't so many typewriters in Hathelsborough as all that," replied Peppermore. "I hope that somebody 'll come forward who can tell us something. Do you notice, sir, that this has been done—the original, I mean—on an old-fashioned machine, and that the lettering is considerably worn. Sir? I hope the *Monitor's* efforts will solve the mystery!"

"Much obliged to you," said Brent. "There's a lot of spade work to do—yet."

He was thinking over the best methods of accomplishing that spade work, when, late that evening, he received a note from Queenie Crood. It was confined to one line:

To-morrow—usual place—three—urgent.—Q.

XXI

BRENT went to bed that night wondering what it was that Queenie Crood wanted. Since their first meeting in the castle grounds, they had met frequently. He was getting interested in Queenie, who developed on acquaintance. Instead of being the meek and mild mouse of Simon Crood's domestic hearth, as Brent had fancied her to be on his visit to her uncle's house, he was discovering possibilities in her that he had not suspected. She had spirit, and imagination, and a continually rebellious desire to get out of Simon Crood's cage and spread her wings in flight—anywhere, so long as Hathelsborough was left behind.

She had told Brent plainly that she thought him foolish to buy property in the town. What was there in that rotten old borough, said Queenie, to keep any man of spirit and enterprise there?

Brent argued the point in his downright way. It was his job, he conceived, to take up his cousin's work where it had been laid down. He was going to regenerate the old town of Hathelsborough.

"And that you'll never do!" affirmed Queenie. "You might as well try to blow up the castle keep with a halfpenny cracker. Hathelsborough people are like the man in the Bible—they're joined to their idols. You can try and try, and you'll only break your heart, or your back, in the effort, just as Wallingford would have done. If Wallingford had been a wise man, he'd have let Hathelsborough go to the devil in its own way. Then he'd have been alive now!"

"Well, I'm going to try," declared Brent. "I said I would, and I will. You wait till I'm elected to that town council — then we'll see!"

"It's like fighting a den of wild beasts," said Queenie. "You won't have a rag left on you when they're through with you."

She used to tell him, at these meetings, of the machinations of Simon Crood and Coppinger and Mallett against his chances of success in the Castle Ward election. According to her, they were moving heaven and earth to prevent him from succeeding Wallingford. Evidently believing Queenie to be a tame bird who would carry no tales, they were given to talking freely before her during their nightly conclaves.

Brent heard a good deal about the underhand methods in which municipal elections are carried on in small country towns. He was almost as much amused as amazed at the unblushing corruption and chicanery of which Queenie told him; and now he fancied that she had some special news of a similar sort to give him.

The election was close at hand, and he knew that Simon and his gang were desperately anxious to defeat him. Although Simon had been elected to the mayoralty, his party in the town council was in a parlous position. At present it had a majority of one. If Brent were elected, that majority would disappear, and there were signs that at the annual elections in the coming November it would be transformed into a minority.

The opponent whom Brent had to face in this by-election was a strong man, a well known, highly respected ratepayer, who, though an adherent of the old party, was a fair-minded and moderate politician, likely to secure the votes of many independent electors. It was going to be a stiff fight, and Brent was thankful for the occasional insights into the opposition's plans of campaign which Queenie was able to give him.

But there were other things than this to think about, and he thought much as he lay wakeful in bed that night, and as he dressed next morning. The proceedings at the adjourned inquest had puzzled him—had left him doubtful and uncertain.

He was not sure about the jealousy theory. He was not sure about Mrs. Saumarez, from what he had seen of her personally, and from what he had heard of her. He was inclined to believe that she was not only a dabbler in politics, with a liking to influence men who were concerned in them, but that she was also the sort of woman who likes to have more than one man in leash. He was now disposed to think that there had been love passages between her and Wallingford—and not only between her and Wallingford, but also between her and Wellesley. There might, after all, be something in the jealousy idea.

But then came in the curious episode of Mrs. Mallett, and the mystery attaching to it. As things presented themselves at present, there seemed to be no chance whatever that either Mrs. Mallett or Wellesley would lift the veil on what was evidently a secret between them.

The only satisfactory and straightforward feature about yesterday's proceedings, Brent thought, was the testimony of Mrs. Bunning as to her unguarded door. Now, at any rate, it was a sure thing that there had been easy means of access to the mayor's parlor that evening. What was necessary was to discover who it was that had taken advantage of the opportunity.

After breakfast, Brent went round to see Hawthwaite. The superintendent gave him a chair and eyed him expectantly.

"We don't seem to be going ahead very fast," remarked Brent.

"Mr. Brent!" exclaimed Hawthwaite. "I assure you we're doing all we can; but did you ever know a more puzzling case? Between you and me, I'm not at all convinced about either Dr. Wellesley or Mrs. Mallett. There's a mystery there which I can't make out. They may have said truth, and they mayn't, and—"

"Cut them out—for the time being, anyway," interrupted Brent. "We got some direct evidence yesterday, for the first time."

"What?" questioned Hawthwaite.

"That door into Bunning's room," replied Brent. "That's where the murderer slipped in."

"Aye—but did he?" said Hawthwaite. "If one could be certain—"

"Look here!" asserted Brent. "There is one thing that is certain—dead certain—that handkerchief."

"Well?" asked Hawthwaite.

"That should be followed up," continued Brent. "There's no doubt whatever that that handkerchief, which Wellesley admits is his, got sent by mistake to one or other of Mrs. Marriner's other customers. That's flat! Now, you can trace it."

"How?" exclaimed Hawthwaite. "A small article like that!"

"It can be done, with patience," said Brent. "It's got to be done. That handkerchief got into somebody's hands, and that somebody is probably the murderer. As to how it can be traced—well, I suggest this. As far as I'm conversant with laundry matters, families, such as Mrs. Marriner says she works for, have laundry books. These books are checked, I believe, when the washing is sent home. If there's an article missing, the person who does the checking notes it. If a wrong article's inclosed, that, too, is noted, and returned to the laundry."

"If Wellesley's handkerchief got to the wrong place, why wasn't it returned?" demanded Hawthwaite.

"To be sure—that's just what you've got to find out," retorted Brent. "You ought to go to Mrs. Marriner's laundry and make an exhaustive search of her books, lists, and so on, till you get some light—see?"

"Mrs. Marriner has, I should say, a hundred customers," remarked Hawthwaite.

"Don't matter if Mrs. Marriner has five hundred customers," said Brent. "That's got to be seen into. If you aren't going to do it, I will. Whoever it was that was in the mayor's parlor tried to burn a bloodstained handkerchief there. That handkerchief was Dr. Wellesley's. Wellesley swears he was never near the mayor's parlor, and I believe him. That handkerchief must have got by error into the box or basket of some other customer of Mrs. Marriner. Trace it!"

He rose and moved toward the door. Hawthwaite nodded.

"We'll make a try at it, Mr. Brent," he said; "but, as I say, to work on a slight clew like that—"

"I've known of far slighter clews," replied Brent.

Yet, as he went away, he reflected on the extreme thinness of this clew. It was possible that the handkerchief had passed through more hands than one before settling in those of the person who had thrown it on the hearth, stained with Wallingford's blood, in the mayor's parlor; but it was a clew, and, in Brent's opinion, *the* clew.

One fact in relation to it had always struck him forcibly—the murderer of his cousin either was a very careless and thoughtless person, or had been obliged to quit the mayor's parlor very hurriedly. Any one meticulously particular about destroying clews or covering up traces would have seen to it that the handkerchief was completely burned before leaving the room. As it was, it seemed to Brent that the murderer had either thrown the handkerchief on the hearth, seen it catch fire, and paid no more attention to it—which would denote carelessness—or had quitted the place immediately after flinging it aside—which would imply that some sound from without had startled him—or her.

Him—or her! Which was it? There

were certain features of the case which had inclined Brent, of late, to speculating on the possibility that his cousin had been murdered by a woman. And, to be sure, a woman was now in the case—Mrs. Mallett. If only he knew why Mrs. Mallett went to see the doctor and the mayor!

But this, after all, was mere speculation, and he had a busy morning before him, in relation to his election business. He had been continuously engaged all the time when at three o'clock he hurried to the castle grounds to meet Queenie. He found her in her usual haunt—a quiet spot in the angle of a wall, where she was accustomed to sit and read.

"Well! Why 'urgent'?" asked Brent, as he dropped into the seat at her side.

"To make sure that you would come," retorted Queenie. "Didn't want to leave it to chance."

"I'm here," said Brent. "Go ahead with the business!"

"Did you see the *Monitor* last night, and that facsimile they gave away with it?" inquired Queenie.

"Yes, I did. I saw the facsimile before it was published. Peppermore showed it to me."

"Very well! That's the urgent business. I know on whose machine that letter—the original, I mean—was typed."

"You do?" cried Brent. "Great Scott! Whose, then?"

"Uncle Simon Crood's. Fact!"

"Whew! So the old fossil's got such a modern invention as a typewriter, has he? And you think—"

"Don't think — I know! He's had a typewriter for years. It's an old-fashioned thing, a good deal worn out. He rarely uses it, but now and then he operates, with one finger, slowly. That letter originated from him—from his machine."

"Proof!" said Brent.

Queenie took up a book that lay on the seat between them, and from it extracted a folded copy of the *Monitor's* facsimile. She leaned nearer to Brent.

"Now look," she said. "Do you notice that two or three of the letters are broken? That M—part of it's gone. That O—half made. The top of that A is missing. More noticeable still—do you see that the small *t* there is slanting the wrong way? Well, all that's on Uncle Simon's machine. I knew where that letter originated as soon as ever I saw this facsimile last night!"

She laid aside the supplement, and, once more opening her book, produced a sheet of paper.

"Look at this," she continued. "When Uncle Simon went out to the tannery this morning, I just took advantage of his absence to type out the alphabet on his machine. Now, then, you glance over that and compare the faulty letters with those in the facsimile. What do you say now?"

"You're a smart girl, Queenie!" said Brent. "You're just the sort of girl I've been wanting to meet—a girl who can see things when they're right in front of her eyes. That's sure, positive proof that old Simon—"

"Oh!" broke in Queenie sharply. "Oh! I say!"

Before Brent could look up, he was conscious that a big and bulky shadow had fallen across the graveled path at their feet. He lifted his eyes. There, in his usual raiment of funereal black, his top hat at the back of his head, his hands behind him under the ample skirts of his frock coat, his broad, fat face heavy with righteous and affectedly sorrowful indignation, stood Simon Crood. His small, piglike eyes were fixed on the papers which the two young people were comparing.

"Hello!" exclaimed Brent. He was quick to see that he and Queenie were in for a row—probably for a row of a decisive sort which would affect both their lives. He purposely threw as much hearty insolence into his tone as he could summon. "Eavesdropping, eh, Mr. Crood?"

Simon withdrew a hand from the sable folds behind him, and waved it in lordly fashion.

"I've no words to waste on impudent young fellers as comes from nobody knows where," he said loftily. "My words is addressed to my niece, as I see sitting there, deceiving of her lawful relative and guardian. Go you home at once, miss!"

"Rot!" exclaimed Brent. "She'll go home when she likes—and not at all, if she doesn't like. You stick where you are, Queenie. I'm here!"

As if to prove the truth of his words, he slipped his right arm around Queenie's waist, clasped it tightly, and turned a defiant eye on Simon.

"See that?" he said. "Well, that's just where Queenie stops, as long as ever Queenie likes! Eh, Queenie?"

The girl, reddening as Brent's arm

slipped around her, instinctively laid her free hand on his wrist. As he appealed to her, he felt her fingers tighten there with a firm, understanding pressure.

"That's all right!" he whispered to her. "We've done it, girly—it's for good!" He looked up at Simon, whose mouth was opening with astonishment. "Queenie's my girl, old bird!" he went on. "She isn't going anywhere—not anywhere at all—at anybody's bidding, unless she likes. And why shouldn't she be here?"

It seemed, from the pause that followed, as if Simon would never find his tongue again; but at last he spoke.

"So this here is what's been going on behind my back, is it, miss?" he demanded, pointedly ignoring Brent and fixing his gaze on Queenie. "Carrying on with strangers at my very gates, as you might say, and in public places in a town of which I'm chief magistrate! What sort of return do you call this, miss, I should like to know, for all that I've done for you? Me that's lodged and boarded and clothed you, ever since—"

"What have I done for you in return?" demanded Queenie, with a flash of spirit. "I've saved you the wages of a couple of servants for all these years; but this is the end. If you're going to throw that in my teeth—"

Brent drew Queenie to her feet and turned her away from Simon. He gave the big man a look over his shoulder.

"That's it, my friend!" he said. "That's the right term—the end! Find somebody else to do your household drudgery. This young lady has done her last stroke for you. Now don't begin to bluster," he added, as Simon, purpling with wrath, shook his fist. "We'll just leave you to yourself!"

He led Queenie away down a quiet walk. Behind the shelter of some trees, he put a finger under her chin, and, lifting her face, looked steadily at her.

"Look here, girly," he said. "You heard what I whispered to you just now—'It's for good'? Didn't I say that? Well, is it?"

Queenie managed to get her eyes to answer him at last.

"Do you mean it?" she murmured.

"I just do!" answered Brent fervently. "Say the word!"

"Yes, then!" whispered Queenie.

She looked at him wonderingly when he had bent and kissed her.

"You're an extraordinary man!" she said. "What am I going to do now? Homeless!"

"Not much!" exclaimed Brent. "You come along with me, Queenie. I'm a good hand at thinking fast. I'll put you up, warm and comfortable, at Mother Appleyard's, and as quick as the thing can be done we'll be married. Got that into your little head? Come on, then!"

That night Brent told Tansley of what had happened, and of what he was going to do. Tansley listened, laughed, and shook his head.

"All right, my lad!" he said. "I've no doubt you and Queenie will suit each other excellently; but you've settled your chances of winning that election, Brent! Simon Crood will bring up every bit of his heavy artillery against you now—and he'll smash you!"

(To be continued in the November number of MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE*)*

ALPHA AND OMEGA

How many years have slipped away
Since this old planet, seamed and gray,
Was but an atom none could trace
Nursed on the boundless lap of Space,
No man can say.

How many years of joy and woe—
Life's flood tide and its undertow—
Shall slip away o'er land and sea
Until our world shall cease to be,
No man can know.

William Hamilton Hayne

The Present Hour

A MEMORY OF YOUNG LOVE AND RUSTIC SIMPLICITY CONTRASTS WITH THE GLARE AND GLITTER OF A BROADWAY ROOF GARDEN

By Reita Lambert

NICKY STEARN'S famous jazz orchestra was dallying waggishly with the incipient chords of a favorite fox trot, as the gilt-embellished elevator released a group of after-theater arrivals. High up above Broadway, above the glare of animated electric signs, with a pallid moon riding close in futile competition, and the street noises mounting in adulterated whiffs, the dancers moved silently over the hard cork floor of the roof garden.

Opalescent lights from a myriad swaying lanterns touched the steady pink and white of artificial complexions with a youthful glow, and lent lackluster eyes a meretricious sparkle. The luminous sheen of soft silks and snowy shoulders blended with the crisp black and white of masculine evening dress. The unity of motion on the dance floor was like some grotesque processional executed to the exotic rhythm in which Chopin and MacDowell alike were cunningly incorporated. The voice of the pretty cigarette girl intoned its ingratiating chant, and waiters padded softly about with officious servility.

Kenneth Sherril held a small silver flask above his wife's ginger ale glass, his brows lifted questioningly. She nodded languidly.

"Not too much!" she warned.

"Just enough to wake you up a bit, Bernie," he said, and poured with the severe concentration of an epicure.

His wife's listless gaze was upon the dancers. Her pale, pink-tipped hands were folded idly in her lap. The gleaming buckle on a snug satin slipper vibrated to the involuntary tapping of her foot.

"Shall we dance?" asked Sherril.

They swung off sedately, with the unconscious ennui of satiety. As they danced, the pervasive bouquet of a dozen rare sachets met and mingled with the fumes from as many brands of cigarettes. Dark shoulders made an effective background for slender, bejeweled hands. Embryonic amours were coaxed into voluptuous fruition by the hedonic lure of lights and music.

"It's really too crowded for comfort tonight," Bernice complained, as a lugubrious note from the saxophone announced the end of the final encore.

Her husband agreed petulantly. The dancers drifted back to their tables, and the chatter recommenced. Bernice patted the regular waves of her marcel and touched a long jade earring with investigating fingers. She lifted her glass, and over its brim lazily appraised her neighbors.

Halfway down the roof, at a small table hugging the ornate paling, her widening gaze lingered, held by what seemed to be a startled incredulity.

"What is it? See some one you know?"

Sherril turned laboriously in his chair to follow his wife's glance. She set down the glass with a hand whose palm was slightly moist.

"Some one I used to know—back home when I was a youngster. Quite startled me, seeing him here, and with all these lanterns, too—"

Her voice had trailed off to a bemused murmur.

"Yes?" Sherril essayed a polite and sympathetic interest. "Who is he? What's his name?"

For a moment her thoughts probed among the débris of many dusty memories, but when her answer came it was in the past tense.

"His name was Victor," she said softly —"Victor Shaw."

II

Pleasant Glen basked in the fragrant, enervating heat of a warm July afternoon. As far as Victor could see from the vantage point of his father's drug store window, Main Street was virtually deserted. The maples flanking the wide thoroughfare drooped dustily above the yellow roadbed. Brilliantly colored dragonflies tacked pointlessly back and forth, like gayly caparisoned craft in search of some vanished port.

The drone of women's voices from Mrs. Cunley's porch, a few doors distant, reached him faintly. An occasional battered buggy or farm wagon lumbered past in the direction of the country, with food supplies and burlap bags of grain bulging from beneath the seats.

So profitless was the prospect that Victor wandered moodily back to the marble fountain and to the further cultivation of his grievance. No fun, this darned soda clerking stunt every darned summer! As if college wasn't bad enough, without having to face this every vacation! It was mean, that's what it was—darned mean.

He polished a tall glass belligerently. A queer sort of father for a fellow to have, turning his only son into a darned soda slinger every summer, just as if he couldn't hold down a regular job as well as any man!

It was at this point of his morose reflections that Victor caught the glint of sunshine on a curly head on the other side of the screen door, and his heart collided violently with his Adam's apple. He turned his back to the counter and began to whistle lustily. Sudden activity supplanted his sullen somnolence. His was the preoccupation of a very busy man.

A prim little voice brought him right-about-face with an air of industry reluctantly and temporarily suspended.

"Why, h'lo, Bernie!" he replied, with a great show of surprise.

"Good afternoon, Victor. It's pretty hot, isn't it?"

"It certainly is a hot day," agreed Victor earnestly.

"I'll have a chocolate soda, please, with vanilla cream in it."

She seated herself on the high stool before the counter, and curled her trim ankles about the rungs. The sun had touched her hair with a dozen tints, ranging from buttercup yellow to rich bronze, and her skin was overlaid with a coating of warm tan, through which the flush of her cheeks glowed like late August peaches. Her short nose and firm forearms were sprinkled with golden freckles. The neck and sleeves of her stiffly starched white frock were edged with billowing ruffles.

She watched gravely while Victor became engrossed in the creation of a draft fit to tempt a sated Epicurus. He set it before her with a portentous flourish, a work of art combining beauty and sustenance. Bernice shook a dime out of her handkerchief and slid it toward him, but the boy brushed it back magnificently.

"Permit *me!*" he said, and dived into his own pocket.

From a handful of small change he selected the required ten cents, and rang up the sale in the cash register. This high-handed chivalry was all over before Bernice could find words to protest.

"Oh, Victor, you *mustn't!*" she chided primly. "I just *can't* come in here for sodas if you *will* do those things!"

"Shucks!" Victor shrugged largely. "Pleased to do it, I'm sure. It—it's a pleasure!"

"Well, thank you—ever so much!"

Disapproval overcast her gratitude, but she sipped daintily, and with relish.

"Is it all right? Sweet enough?" asked Victor critically.

"Oh, yes, thanks—it's just fine. It was *so* hot in the sun!"

"Certainly *is* pretty hot," Victor agreed, and busied himself with sundry faucets and bottles.

Now that the required formalities had been observed, he was like a forlorn lost chicken at roosting time walking disconsolately around its barricaded coop, in search of some niche through which it might crawl to the coveted shelter within.

This haughty composure of Bernice's was trying—and inevitable. Victor always started out to meet her on her own coolly impersonal ground, but her sustained frigidity had a way of stripping him of his own carefully studied nonchalance, of reducing him to cloutish awkwardness. He was slipping now, impelled by a warm ardor for the captivating little figure.

He bent over the counter and spoke eagerly.

"Oh, Bernie, did your father say you could go?"

"Go! Where?"

The guileless question reduced him to wretched incredulity.

"You know—to the dance at Ellsmere, Saturday night."

"Oh, that!" It needed more than Victor's perspicacity to discover beneath her words any hint of the dramatic scene in Bernie's household that morning. "Why, yes, of course I can go—if I want to."

"Oh, bully!" breathed the boy—who would, of course, never guess that the fresh white frock and the casual visit to the drug store had been planned for the sole reason of imparting this bit of information. "But you *do* want to go, don't you, Bernie?"

"Oh, I don't mind. I s'pose I might as well."

"What do you think?" His voice was vibrant with glad anticipation. "Dad says I can take Emma and the new buggy. It's going to be great. There'll be a moon—a full moon. I looked it up in the almanac."

"Is that so? That 'll be nice!"

Her cool little voice carried a maternal tolerance for his enthusiasm. It urged him on to greater descriptive heights.

Everybody was going. An orchestra from Poughkeepsie had been engaged, and was bringing all the newest dance tunes from the New York productions.

But Bernice might have been a weary post-débutante with a string of titled scalps to her credit. She stepped down from the high stool at last, dabbing at her moist lips with an inadequate handkerchief.

"We'll have to start pretty early," Victor was saying desperately. "I'll come for you by seven, or a little after."

"All right, Victor—I'll try to be ready by then," she told him sweetly. "And thanks ever so much for the nice soda!"

The boy watched her retreating figure with baffled frustration in his eyes. And only last night, in her hammock, he had held her hand and talked largely of his college exploits, a young male dominant over her shrinking timidity! Well, girls were certainly funny—darned funny!

III

THE moon had yet to climb into the ken of Pleasant Glen, when, on Saturday night, Victor pulled old Emma to a standstill between the thills of the new buggy and hopped blithely out. He opened the sagging gate before a vine-ridden cottage, and strode up the path.

From between the closed shutters of the parlor blind a girl's eager eyes watched his approach, noting his dark coat and carefully creased white flannel trousers, his sleeked-back hair and the tasty nonchalance of his soft collar. He rang twice before the voice of the watcher's mother summoned her with a note of impatience.

"That must be Victor for you, dear! Didn't you hear the bell?"

And only then did she saunter to the door with the manner of one disturbed at important tasks.

"Oh, it's you, Victor! Is it seven o'clock already?"

"After!" said Victor, taking in her flowered organdie and flaring rose sash with approval. "You'd better bring a wrap—it 'll be cold coming home."

When she came out, with a scarlet cape flung over her arm, he was holding Emma's head, with a belligerent eye on the affectionate old mare that implied dire possibilities were he to relax his vigilance. He helped her gallantly to the seat and took his place at her side. Over her shoulder, Emma inspected them gravely before starting off down the turnpike road toward Ellsmere.

The village streets were engulfed in smoky twilight. The rattle of a lawn mower, interwoven with children's laughter, followed them on a breeze laden with the pungent odor of newly cut grass and late lilac.

Clear of the village, the road narrowed to a cañon flanked by trees and bushes, vocal with bird and insect chatter. Beyond the covered bridge lay a marshy field with a slender white birch standing sentinel over an army of swaying cattails. Scenting an indefinite journey, old Emma settled into a placid jog trot.

"Isn't it a great night for the dance, though?" remarked Victor, breaking a long silence.

"It certainly is," agreed Bernie warmly; "so cool and lovely, too!"

"Be pitch dark before we get there," he predicted.

"Goodness! I hope you can see to drive all right!"

"Don't you worry about that," he told her easily. "The moon 'll be out later, and anyway, I've got the lantern with me."

At seventeen, it was Bernie's first out-of-town dance, and her pulses were quick with the thrill of it. The novelty of the adventure, the mystery of the gently descending night, the proximity of the boy beside her, all titillated her senses pleasantly, and lent the event an aura of romance.

They chatted happily of dancing, of the night, of the burnt-leather table cover Bernie was doing for Victor's room at college. And the moon rode punctually out over a low hillock, bland and yellow and watchful, touching the vague trees and fields with an iridescent glow.

As Victor had so sagely prophesied, when they reached Ellsmere, night had fallen like a black velvet back drop for the gayly lighted town hall. Along the four roads leading into the town vehicles of every description lumbered in, bearing their blithesome cargo to the epochal event. Victor drove his horse into a long, low shed, loosened her bridle, and proudly led Bernie up the festooned path to the rambling wooden building, which served for various public functions, from stray theatrical performances to revival meetings.

Already the place was a scene of lively activity. On a raised platform at one end of the main hall the musicians were " tuning up " with discordant ostentation.

According to custom, Bernie left her escort at the door and went upstairs to a small room curtained off for feminine primping. Here, before a cracked mirror, clustered a bevy of rural belles in correct gala grandeur, amid a veritable orgy of hair patting and sash straightening. A wash basin and pitcher, some decrepit chairs, and a rack laden with cloaks and spangled veils converted the niche into a practical " ladies' room."

Bernie snatched a coveted moment at the glass, ran a side comb through her hair, touched her nose daringly with some rice powder tied up in her handkerchief, and started gayly downstairs.

Victor was waiting for her. Over the balustrade she could see his dark head, freshly sleeked. Her descent suddenly began to seem a spectacular performance, and she was smitten with a self-consciousness that had in it an element of theatricalism. The unexpected blare of music for the first two-step enhanced this sensation, and it was with a wistfully regal air that she gave Victor her hand and stepped off on the waxed floor for the first dance.

It was fortunate that the hall was a large one, for half a dozen neighboring towns had contributed to the assembly. In rows of chairs that discreetly hugged the walls, prideful parents smilingly regarded their offspring. Occasionally even these ancients essayed a round or two of the room; but it was the young people's night. Flaming cheeks and sparkling eyes were lifted to their partners; sashes twirled and pumps sloughed off their new sheen. A few despised youngsters joined their elder sisters and brothers on the floor—scorned prodigies in long white stockings and corkscrew curls.

After the first dance, Bernie found herself besieged by a small army of white flannels and bombarded with requests for dances. A dramatic glow colored this procedure as she dealt out favors to the young gallants. Victor's eyes reproached her over the heads of her attentive circle, and she sparkled back impudently at him.

The music blared forth. The white placard on the piano spelled " waltz." " Come along!" some one shouted. " It's ' Yip I Addy '!"; and she was being whirled about to the jolly waltz tune. " Rings On My Fingers " followed—an irresistible two-step. True to their promise, the Poughkeepsie musicians had brought with them all the new song hits of 1909.

Bernie was in the thrill of a heady exhilaration. She was dancing with a demure lad whose eyes were frankly ardent, when she caught Victor's jealous gaze upon her. For some unaccountable reason the encounter heightened her buoyancy. She dazzled the demure boy guiding her through the intricacies of the barn dance.

" One, two, three — kick!" she sang gayly.

She noted that the girl with whom Victor was dancing was stolid and frowzy—a veritable country bumpkin. Joyous discovery!

But at the first bars of the waltz from " The Merry Widow," Victor pushed his way through Bernie's little court, a determined light in his dark eyes.

" This is mine!" he announced, and grasped her firmly about the waist with the air of a man who has stood enough nonsense.

The strains of that familiar air wove its spell over the dancers. Even the collected Bernie was not impervious to its appeal. She could feel Victor's arms tighten about her, and a wistful apathy succeeded her careless gayety. Life became at once hopelessly sad, insufferably sweet; a thing of profound reflections and haunting memories, of infinite melancholy, unrequited love, pining Isabellas, and dank, myrtle-grown graves.

The warm breeze bore the odor of honeysuckle and wild roses through the open windows. Victor's wan gaze was upon her face, his breath stirred her hair at the temples. He, too, was sad—every one was sad! Well, life was like that—sad, like the poem that goes—"I never loved a fond gazelle." Rough little marbles seemed to fill Bernie's throat. She was excruciatingly miserable.

A storm of applause broke through the portals of her spirit's pensive retreat. She staggered a little as Victor's arms fell from her waist. The musicians were leaving—coldly, heartlessly leaving! She sent an alarmed glance at Victor.

"Intermission," he explained, and added eagerly: "Supper—downstairs—let's hurry and get ahead of the bunch!"

They flew down the stairs with the impetus of a newly discovered hunger. Long tables laden with sandwiches, pickles, and cake were spread in the basement. Exuberant voices acclaimed the collation, and there ensued a good-natured battle for places on the long benches. Victor achieved seats for Bernie and himself, and piled their plates with delicacies. Puns were perpetrated, jokes were retold, girls giggled behind their paper napkins and dipped mischievously into their escorts' ice cream.

"It's always more fun after intermission," Victor told Bernie over his third sandwich; and if noise was any criterion, he was right.

With their waning vitality restored by numberless sandwiches and cups of coffee, the musicians strolled back to their instruments. The dancers swarmed joyously up the stairs — youth, drunk on the potent liquor of its own distilling.

IV

BERNIE'S heady exuberance returned. She was borrowing Circe's own immortal weapons now, with an observant eye to Victor's flattering disapproval.

The demure lad with the ardent eyes paid devoted court, and she accorded him dance after dance—not because she specially favored him. On the contrary, she was beginning to find his ardor trying. There was a curious glaze filming his eyes, and his breath had a strangely offensive odor, acquired, somehow, since intermission. In dancing, he held Bernie closer than her fastidious taste approved; but the chance to arouse Victor's patent jealousy was not to be resisted.

They had come triumphantly through an exacting Boston when the demure lad suggested a stroll on the porch, and Bernie shyly acquiesced. The two wandered outside to the low veranda encircling the building, and explored its dim lengths. The candles in many of the paper lanterns had flickered out, leaving the night in unopposed possession. From the shed where the horses were tied, a pensive whinny followed them.

The demure lad's arm still clutched Bernie's. He was frankly making love to her now, and she exchanged coquettish repartee with him bravely, but with an ear cocked for the opening chords of the next dance. When they came, her spirits lifted with instant relief, and she turned coyly to her companion.

"I guess we'd better go back now, hadn't we?"

"Go back to that stuffy hall, when it's so nice and cool out here?"

His voice fell ingratiatingly close to her ear. Other strollers were deserting the porch for the hall. Bernie watched them trooping through the door with rising fear.

"Oh, I've *got* to go in!" she said, and took a determined step away from him.

His hand clutched her arm and drew her back. She could see his face, a pallid oval in the darkness, very close to her own, and she knew that he was going to kiss her.

"You haven't *got* to do anything but die and pay taxes!" he told her facetiously, and bent his head lower.

Wild panic seized her. His nearness was horrid.

"Please let me go!" she cried.

She struggled fiercely to avoid his lips.

"Didn't you hear the young lady ask you to let go?"

A tall figure stepped resolutely out of the shadows. The demure lad relaxed his grip on Bernie, and turned to face her champion.

"What business is it of yours?" he demanded hotly.

Victor was upon him. The two figures grappled silently, and went over the edge of the low porch. Locked together on the dark lawn, they assumed the proportions of a grotesque double-headed monster.

Saved from the ignominy of that hateful kiss, Bernie watched the battle, her hands at her throat, her eyes wide with fear. The dance music continued in callous oblivion, unconsciously lending an effective off-stage accompaniment to the little drama.

Bernie's threatened danger loomed larger in her imagination; Victor's championship took on the color of medieval heroism. The shadowy lawn became a bloody Aceldama echoing with the ring of metal, and the two boys intrepid knights fighting for their lady's favor. A slender Chloe, in beruffled organdie, she stood in an ague of fear for her knight—but not for long.

A figure emerged from the mêlée—the taller figure of the two—and came toward Bernie, brushing his hands together lightly, like the magician when he has produced a rabbit from the gentleman's hat. The demure lad was staggering away in the direction of the village.

"Oh, Victor!" cried Bernie. "You're not hurt?"

"Shucks, no! I had to teach him a little lesson. He had been drinking."

He sleeked back his hair casually, although his breast still heaved, and Bernie saw that he was, miraculously, unhurt. Her reaction was an impulse to cry, and she swallowed hard. Victor patted her shoulder gently.

"There, there! It's all right—no need to be frightened, Bernie!"

If the admonition was a bit tardy, its effect upon the girl was none the less reassuring. It was a generous annulment of her odious behavior toward him during the evening; but the incident had cost her the scepter she had wielded so cruelly. It was Victor who held it now with quiet mastery.

"I—I think we'd better go home," suggested Bernie meekly.

"Not a bad idea," agreed Victor. "Run along and get your coat."

When she reappeared, Emma and the new buggy, with the lantern swinging from the axle, were before the porch. In portentous silence Victor helped her in, followed, and picked up the reins.

V

The moon had deserted them, and the stars were already paling, as if in sympathy. Fields and shrubs were overlaid with a heavy coating of satiny dew, through which the narrow road ambled, a dark, ragged ribbon. A chorus of the tiny frogs known to country people as "peepers," filled the night with a mournful ululation.

Miserably penitent, Bernie huddled against the seat. Victor loomed beside her, his splendid heroism draping him in unapproachable majesty. Bernie searched desperately for words that would dissipate the wretched silence—something airy and nonchalant; but it was her contrite little heart that spoke:

"I'm awfully sorry, Victor, about—everything—that dreadful boy, and all!"

"Oh, shucks!" said Victor prosaically, rising to unexpected heights of bliss on his own magnanimity.

Silence fell again, but shot through, now, with tender vibrations.

"Cold, little girl?"

If she had been cold, his sweet solicitude would have dispelled the chill. She shook her head shyly, gratefully, but he was unconvinced. She felt his arm encircle her shoulder, while he made a pretense of drawing her cape more snugly about her throat. Involuntarily she relaxed against his arm, and he drew her head down until it found the hollow of his shoulder.

The lantern beneath the buggy sent out hopeful little rays into the tangled undergrowth beside the road, and old Emma's hoofs clumped a patient tattoo on the dry earth. Victor's arm engirdled Bernie—a protective bulwark against the thickening mysteries of the night.

Presently his cheek found hers, and for the second time that evening Bernie knew that she was going to be kissed. An exquisite tremor assailed her while his head sank lower and his lips sought her own. It was a gentle, reverent kiss, and there was magic in it—tears and exaltation and sweet oblivion.

"Dear, dear little girl!" His voice was husky with passionate awe. "You *do* love me a little?"

She buried her face in his coat, and he patted her hair gently. She felt suddenly timid and fragile and clinging. She wished to feel so—with Victor. By some strange atavistic instinct she knew that her helplessness was at once her power and her appeal.

"You *do* love me, Bernie?"

She found it possible to nod shyly against his coat.

"You'll wait for me until I'm through college?"

She nodded again, and snuggled closer.

"You'll never love any one else?"

A challenge to her fidelity! She drew away, hurt beyond belief.

"Oh, Victor!" she cried reproachfully.

He was adamant, being wise with the wisdom born of that eventful evening.

"You'll never let any other fellows kiss you?" he insisted.

"Victor! How can you?"

Ah, indeed, how could he? In an agony of remorse he kissed the hurt from her eyes.

"It 'll only be two more years, sweetheart!" he said cheerily.

But they both recognized it for the desolate æon it was, despite his light tone.

"And you'll have to go away from me!" she said sadly.

For a moment the dismal prospect of enforced separation quite extinguished the flame of their ecstasy.

"Are you sure, Victor," pressed Bernie, when that anticipatory shroud had lifted, "that he didn't hurt you—that awful boy?"

"Him? Hurt *me?* Ba-ah!" said Victor with cryptic awfulness.

"Oh, Victor!"

The armor of his impressive insouciance was not proof against that flattering anxiety.

"Lucky for him I didn't kill him!" he added darkly.

Awed silence followed, broken by the call of a persevering whippoorwill. Feeble points of light ahead whisked their Arcadia to the prosaic purlieus of Pleasant Glen, breaking through the night like the emissaries of some relentless adversary. Old Emma bore them, in mute dejection, through the sleeping village to Bernie's gate. The anguish of parting rendered them inarticulate for a moment. Victor was first to speak.

"Say you love me before you go, Bernie! Say it!"

"You *know,* Victor!" she temporized shyly.

"*Say* it!" he demanded.

His fingers closed firmly, compellingly, over hers. The proprietary pressure of that strong, warm hand served to imbue her with something of his own high valor—to lend her heart the courage of its tender passion. She found the words, small as they were, and almost unintelligible against his coat.

"I—I do l-love you, Victor!"

"And you'll wait for me—always?"

Ah, the impassioned ardor of that young voice as she promised, with her wet eyes yearning up to his, and her scarlet cape falling away from her little immature white throat!

"Forever and ever, Victor!" she breathed.

VI

The strains of a seductive fox trot quickened the sluggish pulses of the dancers on the ornate roof garden beetling over Times Square. Bernice Sherril sipped her drink mechanically. Her nostalgic gaze was on the man whose presence there had connoted that long dead episode, transformed the colored electric lights into the gaudy paper lanterns that had once festooned the town hall at Ellsmere, and invested the strained and blasé faces about her with the blithe placidity of those rural revelers.

She noted, with a grim little droop of the lips, that his dark hair was sleeked shinily back, as of old, but that time had splashed his temples with silver—a benevolent act that lent him added distinction. His clothes showed a meticulous attention to detail significant of the thorough cosmopolite, but the old, irresistible charm was in the smile he flashed upon his companion, the old allure in the deferential incline of his head.

The woman, Bernie noticed, was a stunning creature in a décolleté gown of shimmering black. Marooned in the little oasis of their own preoccupation, they were flirting across the narrow table—experts at a game whose secret processes they had long since fathomed.

Watching them from beneath her lowered lids, Bernice saw the man cover his companion's hand with his own—an impulsive gesture, at once proprietary and tender. Of a sudden her nostrils were assailed by the agglomerate odors of a summer night, her ears by the faint, persistent complaint of a distant whippoorwill and by the throbbing tones of a young voice, eagerly demanding:

"Say it! *Say* it!"

She tore her eyes away from that narrow table, her hands at her throat pulsating with an uprush of emotion that threatened to suffocate her, and anchored her distraught gaze to the florid familiarities of her husband's face. He was patting back a yawn with a nicely manicured hand, and his querulous words sifted through his languid fingers:

"How about it? Shall we trot along? It's so darned crowded to-night!"

Mechanically she slipped her arms into her wrap, rose, and made her way toward the elevator.

"Always the case!" her husband was grumbling. "Saturday night — crowded, stuffy—"

His voice trailed off petulantly.

Crowded! Stuffy! Saturday night!

The words broke through the protective barricade of her supine inertia, and stirred the quiescent ghosts within the sepulcher of her memory. For a moment she gazed back into that dank cavern, and contemplated the ruins left by the inexorable march of time. In an agony of frustration she recognized clearly, and for the first time, her impotence to halt the marching army of years, or to reconstruct the devastation left in their wake.

And then Nirvana, in the guise of the gilt embellished elevator, received her, and she was catapulted down to the street below.

Jonathan Steck, Supersleuth

THE STORY OF THE MYSTERIOUS SERIES OF ROBBERIES AT THE MAISON ELISÉE

By Cynthia Vaughn Kirkman

THE house detective tripped timidly into the luxurious office of Mme. Elisée, owner and manager of the exclusive and heretofore well ordered Maison Elisée.

Madame tapped a silver pencil angrily on her tapestried desk.

"Seet yourself down, Steck, an' tell to me ze meaning of all zis," she said.

Every one at the Maison Elisée knew perfectly well to what "all zis" referred. It had all begun about six weeks before, when the Stylish Stout had missed a five-dollar bill from her purse, which she had fastened securely in her locker. General opinion around the place held that she must have lost the money before entering the building, until, the following day, she discovered the five-dollar bill in her make-up box, pinned to her powder puff.

The make-up box, at the time, was in the models' room, where she usually kept it. Mystery—how did the five dollars get out of the locker, and how did it get into the make-up box?

There followed a series of miraculous disappearances and reappearances of articles of trifling value, and small sums of money. While all this was quite annoying, it was held to be the work of some practical joker with a perverted sense of humor, and was not taken seriously until articles of greater value began to disappear, without reappearing at all. To-day the climax had come, as *madame* proceeded to explain to Steck.

"Some weeks ago I talk wiz you about ze zings zat been missing; but when zey all come back again, I say I zink he is all a joke, an' tell you not to give plaisaire to ze jokaire by paying ze attention. Now he is not a joke, and zis is ze last limit. My patience she is on end. Zis morning Mme. René she come to me an' say, 'One of my kid gloves she is gone. Yesterday eet is feevty cents from my coat pocket. I look everywhere, eet is not zere. Puff! She is gone like zat!' I laugh at Mme. René. 'Puff!' I say to her. 'You are gone in ze head—like zat!' Zen I meet Mme. Dubois in ze hall. '*Nom de Dieu!*' she say to me. 'My cus-to-mer, her card case, she is gone from ze fitting room!' We look in ze room, an' ze card case is not zere. Zen I phone you."

Steck leaned forward almost joyfully.

"Robbery!" he murmured, dwelling soulfully on each syllable of the word.

A real, honest-to-goodness robbery for the first time in ten years! Mystery and new importance for Steck—Steck, who for twenty drab years had faithfully served Elisée as errand boy, as delivery man, and finally as house detective.

Upon Steck had been bestowed the title of house detective by the kind-hearted Elisée more as a reward for his long years of service than for any faith she had in him as a sleuth. *Madame* was old-fashioned in the matter of house detectives, and had no real use for them. She had managed her business for a generation with little loss from thievery. On the rare occasions when she had suffered robbery, an outside detective, hired to ferret out the criminal, had usually proved quite satisfactory.

The bestowing of his title on Steck had satisfied both her sense of humor and the new detective's vanity. It served in lieu of a pension, for the last thing in the world Steck desired was to leave Elisée's, even on a pension.

The little man had taken his new honor quite seriously. He was a simple-minded fellow, the son of an up-State farmer. From the time when he first arrived in New York, some twenty years before, he had devoted himself entirely to his humble duties at Elisée's.

He was intensely loyal to the place. On assuming his new duties, he had been greatly concerned about the carelessness with which things were left about, fairly tempting people to make away with them; but his remonstrances had never stirred *madame* to any action in the matter.

As time went on, and none of his predictions as to petty or grand larceny came true, he became vastly discontented. To what end had he read all the literature bearing on detective work, and even gone to the length of taking a correspondence course in the art? He was thoroughly trained to face the most mysterious crime and solve its secret — and there was no crime to solve!

In short, Steck was beginning to feel that with all his new honor he was merely a supernumerary, while he longed to be a supersleuth.

Imagine, then, the delight with which the little man hailed this opportunity to vindicate himself!

"Robbery!" he repeated, his whole soul in the thrilling syllables.

"Of course eét eez rob-bery," *madame* answered impatiently; "but who eez ze zief? Somebody in zis vairy building—an' who eet eez you mus' discover for me."

Steck plucked an imaginary thread from the lapel of his gray alpaca coat, and squared his shoulders importantly.

"I'll report to you to-morrow morning," he promised *madame*. "I got my suspicions already."

He rose with dignity, marched downstairs to the employees' entrance, paused beside the time clock, and removed the time cards from the file. These he carried back into the deserted lunch room, pulled a three-legged stool up to one of the tables, and spread the cards out before him.

II

Up in the third-floor front room, rough and unshapely hands were transforming cobweb laces and gauzy silks into clinging copies of exclusive models. The workwomen, lifting tired eyes from monotonous basting and fittings, stole swift, envious glances through the windows at the throngs strolling along Fifth Avenue.

On the floor below, in the models' room, soft and slender fingers were busy rouging cheeks and lips that were already pink, and repowdering snowy arms and shoulders. Saleswomen wandered in every now and then, to straighten hair nets and powder noses before the early afternoon customers began to drift in.

Seated in the corner, the Perfect Thirty-Six gazed complacently at her reflection in the mirror, patted her near-auburn side puffs into shape, yawned, and kicked her show slippers from under the bench.

"Went to see a swell show last night," she volunteered.

Six pairs of model eyes regarded her with interest.

"'Deburau,' it was called. French, you know. Fellah spends his life gettin' stung, till he gets wise that life ain't all jazz—yes, he does! But he meets a swell chicken and tumbles again. Then what happens but along comes another guy with a lot more dough, an' what does she do but up an' give the poor boob the air? Hey, who's got my stockin's?"

"Ain't seen 'em," offered the girl from the wholesale dress house.

"Yeh—you wouldn't!" sniffed the Perfect Thirty-Six. Stockings or no stockings, these wholesale people should be kept in place. " Stuffed 'em in my slippers this noon, an' they're gone. Second pair an' a half that's been swiped on me this season, too!"

The Stylish Stout, seated across the room, glared.

" Say, where d'ye get that rough stuff, Hortense? Swiped 'em? Huh, mebbe Ambrose used 'em to mop up with this noon. Better look in the wastebasket. Swiped 'em! My Gawd! Lock the door an' hide the key!"

" What d'ye mean, look in the wastebasket? Four ninety-eight I had to pay for those babies, an' I guess this ain't the first funny thing that's been pulled around here, anyway!"

Hortense Bergold slipped her black stockings and oxfords back on again with disgust.

" Well, guess I'll go down to my locker and see if my old pinkies are still living," she said, as she tossed her slippers angrily under the seat and started on the search for her last season's stockings.

Outside, in the passageway, a group of excited saleswomen were clustered around the door of the stock room. Mme. Elisée had just arrived upon the scene, and was sharply questioning Mahoney, head stock clerk.

" Ze blue fox zat I bring from Paris wiz me—*sacré mille de cochons!*" she gasped. " Mahoney, you say you put eet away yourself last night? Vairy well! Zere are three keys to ze room. You have one, Steck has one, and mine she does not count. She ees in my desk. Where ees eet zat you keep ze key?"

Mahoney indignantly exhibited her key, hanging majestically from a rusty safety pin fastened to the belt of her apron.

Madame spotted Hortense.

" Go downstairs and find for me Steck," she directed sharply.

Hortense sped down the front stairs to the doorman.

" Seen Steck?" she asked.

Von Bülow jerked a white-gloved thumb over his left shoulder.

" Back in the lunch room, lookin' over the time cards. What's up?"

" Ask Elisée," Hortense advised him, as she darted off in pursuit of Steck. " How am I to know?"

Through the back hall came the odor of coffee. Ambrose, *chef* by courtesy of the lunch room at Elisée's, and odd-job man in chief, had evidently arrived. As Hortense started to enter the room, she found him leaning over Steck's shoulder with interest. The two were conversing earnestly, and Hortense paused before entering.

" Wall!" Steck was saying, as he gently rubbed the pale red stubble which decorated his chin. " I dunno! 'Pears to me that 'most anybody might be guilty, barrin' Elisée herself."

Here Steck recalled directions given in a battered copy of " Sleuthfoot," which he had in his pocket.

" The common proceedin's is to have a suspect an' then establish a motive," he continued. " Now any one here but Elisée might have a motive, mightn't they? So 'most anybody in the buildin' might be suspected; but you got to narrey it down to a few. There's only one A, an' that's Andrews, that drives the wagon. He ain't never here, so he's out. Then comes that Bergold girl. I'm goin' to keep my eye on her, all right! Gettin' here half an hour late every mornin', an' then chuckin' me under the chin an' thinkin' I ain't goin' to have her docked for comin' in late!"

Hortense slipped back behind the door, stifling her first impulse to protest forcibly. Why not stay and find out where things stood?

Ambrose pushed back his white starched cap and scratched his forehead.

" Well, now, I don't know about that, Steck. She ain't half so bad as the next one. Margie Connelly's the Stylish Stout, y' know. I'd believe anything of a girl what cleans my place out the way she does every noon. Eight sandwiches, two cups o' coffee, an' sometimes three hunks o' mince pie! Then she's always tryin' to charge it, an' fergittin' to pay. A regular criminal, if ever there was one, Steck—them's my sentiments!"

So down went the Stylish Stout on the criminal list.

" Well, there ain't no D's nor E's nor F's," observed Steck. " The G's and H's an' I's I don't know nuthin' about, so that lets them out. Mary Kearney comes next, and I like her, so she don't count. Hey, what about Mahoney? Oh, yeh—bein' stock clerk, she's got keys to everything, same as me. Down she goes!"

" You bet, an' better put all the salesladies down, too. I don't trust that bunch o' swells that go gallivantin' around to swell restaurants, an' never patronizin'

Ambrose, that always gives everybody a square deal. They get so used to puttin' things over on the customers, too. Downright demoralizin', that's what!"

And thus it was that the list of suspects was compiled by the science of elimination, Steck, the eminent criminologist, being aided and checked by Ambrose.

Hortense entered the lunch room noisily.

"Hey, Steck! Elisée wants you upstairs," she announced affably. "A blue fox has gone from the stock room; an' I guess y' might as well look up one of my silk stockings that's gone too, while you're at it."

Steck and Ambrose exchanged glances. Had the head model made away with something of her own, to avert suspicion?

Steck mysteriously scribbled a few lines in his yellow notebook, snapped it shut, and stored it away in his vest pocket. Then he glanced coldly at Hortense.

"You ain't tellin' me nothin' that I didn't know already," he observed with crushing dignity. "I had my present'ments some time ago."

Presentiments, Steck understood, are the things that make detectives what they are. He believed there was no better set of presentiments in town than those stored away in his own fuzzy head.

Ambrose listened to him with undisguised admiration.

"Some present'ments, I'll say," sniffed Hortense, "from all the work you've had presentin' yerself around here detectin'! Must have had lots of time to polish 'em up while you was watchin' the time clock an' emptyin' wastebaskets around the place—eh, what?"

Steck clenched his hands together grimly as he stalked out of the room.

"Mebbe so — mebbe so," he muttered. "Wait an' see—just wait an' see!"

III

Upstairs, the commotion had nearly subsided. Mahoney had stationed herself in front of the closed stock room door, defying further invasion. The saleswomen were busy with their customers, and the models were displaying the new imports in the showroom.

Mahoney gave Steck Mme. Elisée's orders—that he was to meet her upstairs in the office, immediately.

Steck resented taking even Elisée's orders from Mahoney, and listened to the stock clerk disdainfully. As he walked away, he turned to shoot a baleful glance back over his shoulder at her.

"Take it from me, some o' these people who do so much talkin' around here ain't goin' to have so much to say pretty quick. You mark my words!"

He shook his stubby finger at her warningly. Mahoney received the warning with a broad grin and a chuckle.

"Just tickle old Steck to pieces to have Elisée think I'd been fiddling with things around the place," she told herself; "just because I'm the only one what's been here longer than he has!"

But Mahoney's broad grin soon faded from her large face, and an anxious pucker wrinkled her forehead into worried little lines.

Quickly forgetting the indignities he had suffered at the hands of Hortense Bergold and Mahoney, Steck trudged happily up to the office. He found Elisée pacing up and down her room excitedly.

"Ze blue fox—you hear about zat, Steck?"

Steck nodded his head gravely, with the profound assurance of the all-hearing.

"Steck, you tell me already you suspect somebodies. Who eez eet?"

Steck closed the door cautiously, and settled himself comfortably in a big chair by the window.

"*Madame,* you must be prepared for anything," he warned her darkly. "This is a woman's job, if ever I saw one."

Mme. Elisée shrugged her shoulders impatiently.

"Well, what of eet? How do you know he is a woman, and who ees eet?"

"Patience, *madame* — patience," said Steck soothingly. "It is a woman, and a poor woman — that much is certain. A man would have taken something more valuable, an' something he could have got rid of quick. Also he wouldn't have got skeered off so easy at first, an' put back the money an' things as soon as they was missed, without even tryin' to make a getaway. It was a poor woman, because the card case an' the fifty cents an' the fur would 'a' meant something to her. She didn't want to sell the card case an' the fur, or she'd 'a' taken something more valuable, wouldn't she? No, siree! She wanted them two things to doll up herself for a beau on Sunday. An' furthermore" —triumphantly—"I got the names of the three women that's most likely to be guilty right here!"

"Who are zey?" demanded Elisée.

Steck consulted his yellow notebook impressively.

"Hortense Bergold, Mahoney, an' the Stylish Stout," he read.

Elisée pulled her lips together tightly, just in time to hide the first smile she had indulged in for some time.

"Ah, Steck!" she murmured. "Eet ees true zat you do not like zees people whose names you read to me, eez eet not?"

Steck shook his head violently.

"I should say not!" he agreed hotly. "I wouldn't be a bit surprised if every one of 'em was guilty!"

Elisée laughed softly.

"Ah, I see!" said she. "Zee feevty cents for Mees Ber-gold, zee card case for Mahoney, and zee blue fox for Miss Connelly—or would you razer have ze blue fox for Mahoney, whom you like bes' of all, I zink?" Then *madame* grew serious. "Ah, no, Steck, eet eez all wrong—I see zat now. You are—what you say? Ah, yes—prejudeeced. Zat will nevaire do. I mus' get some one else to find zee zief for me — a man from outside. Zat ees all, Steck. You may go, an' zank you vairy much."

The little detective clutched the arms of his chair tightly, his lips trembled, and a half sob escaped as he closed them feebly. His first holiday in years—not from work, but to work as a glorified sleuth—gone! The zest of life and happiness gone, perhaps forever!

Elisée watched him with sympathy. Her anxiety, for the moment, had left her. She was realizing for the first time how devoted this funny little man had been to the Maison Elisée for the last twenty years, and how heartless it was of her to make fun of him.

"But, Steck, you must help zis new man. You see, it really all depends on you; for what will he know of ze house or ze employees if you, Steck, ze house detective, are not constantly wiz him?"

At this appeal to his loyalty, Steck rose miserably to his feet.

"Sure! I'll help him," he assured *madame;* "but he'll never take the same personal interest in the case that I have."

Elisée watched the little man ramble slowly down the hallway. His shoulders drooped disconsolately, as if they bore the crushing weight of all the combined miseries of the world.

She pitied him tremendously, but the safety and the reputation of her business were at stake. A competent detective must be put on the job at once, before any further mischief was done.

Elisée snapped the telephone receiver off the hook, and got into communication with one of the leading detective agencies.

IV

THE next morning, Steck, as usual, was busy watching the employees punch their time cards. As the last stock girl hurried in, stamped her card, and rushed upstairs, an inconspicuous and nondescript man hesitated a moment before the employees' entrance, and then entered the hall. Steck glanced up, pushed his spectacles farther down upon his nose, and carelessly looked him over.

Satisfied that he had placed the stranger, he looked at him severely.

"Hey, you hemstitchers and knife pleaters make me tired!" Steck remarked. "The back door for yours! Ain't y' ever goin' to learn nothin'?"

Thomas Nevins, of the Burns Agency, smiled quietly at the amateur sleuth as he exhibited his credentials.

Steck readjusted his spectacles and looked over the newcomer with renewed interest.

"Wall, wall!" he ejaculated. "Who'd think you was a regular detective from a big place like that?"

Then swiftly came the thought that his greeting had lacked diplomacy, to say the least.

"Well, y' can't have everything, can ye?" he added comfortingly. "I guess ye got to have something more than looks to get goin' good, anyway."

Nevins smiled again.

"You must be Mr. Steck," he observed. "As you have probably noticed, my name is Nevins. Now, if you don't mind, will you show me around the building a bit?"

After exploring the lunch and locker rooms and the delivery department in the basement, they went upstairs. Having shown Nevins around the fitting rooms and the big showroom, Steck took him to the stock room, and to the vault in which the furs were stored.

They met Mahoney in the hallway between the two rooms. She had just come down from the workroom upstairs, to get some gowns and furs for the display windows. Steck mumbled a grudging "good morning" to her, and Mahoney regarded the stranger with curiosity.

"Who's your new friend?" she asked, as she unlocked the door to the vault.

"Nevins," answered Steck, as he stepped inside. "Well, I'll be gol-darned!" he gasped.

Mahoney peered over his shoulder, and tottered back against the door, to which she clung for support. Before them, on the floor, in tumbled disorder, lay the choicest of *madame's* valuable fur wraps and scarfs. The hangers on which they had been neatly hung were scattered about the room. The boxes in which the smaller skins were packed had been torn open and thrown into a disorderly mess in one corner of the room.

Nevins took in the whole situation in one swift glance.

"I suggest that we go over the rest of the building at once, see if anything else has been disturbed or removed, and then report to *madame,*" he said to Steck. Then he turned to Mahoney. "Will you kindly see that nothing is disturbed here until I return?"

Across the hall, the stock room was in the same topsy-turvy state. A visit to the millinery department, and an interview with the excited Mme. René revealed the fact that three lace boudoir caps were missing, and that all the models' kid gloves had been removed from their lockers — which indicated that the thief had been in the building that very morning.

The tour completed, Nevins went directly to Mme. Elisée's office. There he remained for nearly an hour, conferring with *madame.*

Mahoney, in the meanwhile, checked up the missing stock from her inventory. The list included six small scarfs from the storeroom, and, from the stock department, a lace nightgown, a silk sweater, a purple umbrella, and one pink ballet slipper.

V

Mme. Elisée's whole establishment, from the basement to the storerooms on the top floor, had been thrown into a state of complete confusion and uproar by this culminating episode.

One by one the employees were called into her office, for a complete account of their movements in the building since the previous morning. Every one had her own favorite suspect, and little groups of saleswomen, stock girls, and models huddled together in empty fitting rooms and in the back hallway, to discuss their various theories regarding the robberies.

Elisée herself was desperate. In the whole house Nevins alone appeared to be perfectly well balanced and at ease. Steck watched his investigations with poorly concealed scorn.

"Half asleep—that's what he is, pussy-footin' aroun' like a bloomin' sleepwalker," he told Ambrose, who listened with sympathy to his friend between the cooking of pancakes for the workwomen's lunch.

"Now, if I was doin' it," continued Steck, "first thing I'd do would be to go to the suspects' homes. Mos' as likely as not, the thief's got an accomplice that's sneaked the things out for her. He makes me sick, I tell you, slidin' aroun' the carpets like a trained alligator, an' pretendin' he's a detective!"

In the afternoon the Maison Elisée quieted down, and the shop was closed after the usual routine of putting things in order and locking them up for the night.

About an hour before closing time Nevins disappeared from the premises, disregarding *madame's* plan that a night watchman from the agency should be left to guard the place. He sauntered out carelessly by the tradesmen's door in the rear of the basement, and passed down the alleyway leading to Sixth Avenue. Here he boarded a down town trolley car, from which he dismounted at Fifteenth Street. Turning to the left, he quietly opened the door of one of the shabby lodging houses, softly climbed the stairs, and moved down a dark, narrow passageway to the door at the end of the hall.

He paused to look over the long, narrow keys attached to his slender metal key ring. After selecting the one he desired, he placed it carefully in the keyhole, gently turned the greasy, finger-stained knob, and entered the modest dwelling of Jonathan Steck.

Half an hour later the door opened again. The owner of the apartment had arrived. Fumbling in his pocket, he finally discovered a match, struck a light, and turned on the gas.

Steck looked around the room, and

chuckled with glee as he rubbed his knotted old hands together with enthusiasm. Edging over to a cracked bit of mirror that hung over the tin wash basin in the corner, he shook his stubby finger playfully at his reflection, wagging his head approvingly.

Steck chuckled again as his eyes dwelled first on Mme. René's three lace boudoir caps decorating the three surviving posts of the decrepit bedstead in the opposite corner. The purple umbrella swung jauntily from its corded handle, which was twisted around the gas jet. From one of its enameled ribs dangled a tinseled ballet slipper, and on a broken old horsehair couch reposed the pink lace nightgown that had been the pride of Mahoney's life.

Steck affectionately eyed the little fur scarfs spread out on the faded red quilt which covered his bed.

"Nice kitties! Papa's goin' to take ye all home again," he promised them.

A few minutes later Steck staggered out under the weight of an awkward bundle. The expression on his face was far from that of a guilty man.

Then Nevins swiftly opened the closet door and followed, somewhat puzzled and decidedly cynical as to the purity of Steck's purpose. His impulse had been to arrest the little man before he could leave the house, but he decided to let him hang himself completely; for the Burns man was convinced that in some way his quarry had suspected he was being watched, and on the spur of the moment had sprung his soliloquy as a blind.

Steck trotted out of the tenement house and into a waiting taxi. At that instant the proprietor of a shop across the street came out, locked his door for the night, and started to crank up his flivver. Nevins dashed over, flashed his badge before the awed tradesman's eyes, and impressed him into service. Before Steck's chariot had rounded the first corner, the flivver was in pursuit.

VI

Much to the pursuer's surprise, the fugitive pointed back to the Maison Elisée, as true to the course of a homing pigeon as traffic laws and rectangular blocks would allow.

From across the way, Nevins, keeping his involuntary driver waiting, watched Steck turn into the alley beside Elisée's. The house detective dismissed his taxi promptly, and entered the building through the tradesmen's door, in the rear, with his bundle.

Before Nevins could call a policeman to watch the front entrance of the Maison Elisée, Steck reappeared, empty-handed. Again the professional detective restrained his impulse to arrest Steck on the spot, still curious as to what the little man would do next.

Shadowing Steck down the street, he paused long enough to warn the officer on the beat to keep an eye on Elisée's. Then he followed the house detective back to his home. He telephoned his office to have an assistant assigned to stand guard during the night, and to see that Steck did not escape.

The next morning the Burns detective gave a complete report to the astonished and indignant Mme. Elisée.

"But why eez eet zat you did not arrest heem?" *madame* demanded angrily.

"Because there's something queer about this game," Nevins explained. "The old boy may have a pal working with him, and if there's a gang on the job, and we give him rope, it may lead us to them. Maybe he got scared and returned the stuff as a blind, and they may try again."

"But why are you so sure zat he brought back ze zings, since you did not follow him into ze building?" asked *madame,* as she rang for Mahoney.

A second later the stock clerk burst into the room, her large arms overflowing with Steck's restored plunder.

"Found 'em in a bundle in the stock room!" puffed Mahoney. "Everything is here what was stolen!"

"You are sure zat everyzing eez zere?" Elisée demanded, fumbling excitedly with the goods, which Mahoney had spread out on a chair.

A brief inventory satisfied *madame.*

"Have you seen Steck zis morning, Mahoney?" was her next question.

But before Mahoney could answer, Steck appeared in the doorway, an expression of triumph on his withered old face.

"Yeh found 'em just where I left 'em, didn't yeh?" he exclaimed. "Thought ole Steck was slow, didn't yeh? Had to get an outside man on the job, an' me with my suspicions workin' right along! I just waited for a chance all these years to prove I wasn't just an ornyment around here. While this here gentleman was standin' around an' lookin' wise, ole Steck hops right along, an' not only runs down the thief, but captures every last rag he stole! What's more, I reckon yeh been taught a pretty good lesson about takin' keer o' things around here, too!"

Madame dismissed Mahoney, and turned to Steck.

"But who was ze zief?"

"Can't tell yeh that, *madame.* Thief broke down under my rapid fire detection, an' agreed to bring everything back if I promised not to give him away."

"How dare you do zat, Steck? Ees eet for you or ees eet for me, Elisée, ze owner of ze place, to forgive ze scoundrel?"

Steck's complaisance faded. He nervously twisted a loose button on his shabby coat. *Madame* pressed her advantage.

"But what of ze suspects you tell me of? What of zem—Mahoney, Margie Connelly, and Mees Ber-gold?"

Steck shifted about uneasily. Then, lowering his voice, he confided in *madame.*

"To tell the truth, it was an' outside job, *madame,* an' my present'ments were wrong fer once."

Madame was somewhat mollified by his readiness to clear his ancient enemies. Moreover, she was becoming convinced that the little man had merely perpetrated the rather clumsy trick for the sake of advancing himself in her esteem, and to bring clearly before her the need of protecting her property more carefully.

One thing, however, *madame* could not forgive, for she was a thrifty soul.

"Zink what you have cost me by not stopping zis zing sooner! I have to get zis man to do ze work which I have put in ze hands of Steck!"

The little detective had not thought of this before. He saw now that he had virtually defrauded his employer, and it made him thoroughly miserable.

Mme. Elisée watched Steck as he wandered unhappily over to the window. He turned to glare at the cause of all his trouble—Nevins, who sat nonchalantly smoking a cigarette, and wondering why *madame* was deferring her accusation. *Madame* herself was debating whether she should carry the farce any further, or tell Steck outright that she knew he was guilty, and discharge him.

The little man crossed the room and faced her.

"Mebbe you won't want me around here no more, *madame,*" he faltered. "If you do, I'd like awful well to sort o' square my carelessness by payin' for this here Burns man out o' my salary."

Elisée's desire for vengeance weakened. The evident misery of the little man, and his willingness to make restitution, appealed to her sympathies, and she determined to humiliate him no further.

She turned to Nevins.

"For me ze case she eez ended. Tell your office zat zey may send me ze bill."

Several weeks afterward, Nevins passed the Maison Elisée as he was hurrying down the avenue. Steck, clad in white silk stockings, velvet knickers, and all the gilded glory of a Fifth Avenue doorman, saluted him with excessive dignity.

"I'm doorman now," he informed the detective. "Von Bülow, the old doorman, is receivin' clerk. *Madame* figgered that as the last thief was an outsider, it was more important for me to be out here, where I could size people up as they came into the buildin'. Pretty hard to dope folks out, ain't it, Nevins—just between you an' me? But I'm makin' quite a study o' criminals, an' I reckon I'm a better detective now than I ever was. Reckon they won't many of 'em git in our store, unless they come disguised!"

THE ROAD

Into the distance drear and dim
 Goes the road, and I go, too,
On to the far horizon's rim,
 Ever and ever away from you.

Yet howsoever wide we part,
 Dawn or dusk, my fond and true,
Ever and ever my constant heart
 Backward fares on the road to you!

Clinton Scollard

Not-Afraid

A WESTERN STORY OF STRONG MEN AND STRENUOUS DAYS

By Dane Coolidge

Author of "The Desert Trail," "Lost Wagons," etc.

XX

THE two Heminway boys awaited Ranchester's approach with downcast eyes.

"I can't go," announced Webb, glancing up at him shamefacedly.

Ranchester's fighting eyes blazed.

"No, of course not!" he replied. "Why didn't you say so an hour ago? You'd made up your mind, right then."

"No, I hadn't," denied Webb; "but Prairie Rose is against it. She says it wouldn't be right."

"And why not, pray?" inquired Ranchester, turning his angry gaze on her.

A flush mounted up beneath the girl's tan.

"Did you kill Eddie Yaples?" she demanded of Webb. "No. Well, wouldn't that be swearing to a lie?"

"Yes, but what difference would it make?" pleaded Webb. "I went out to kill him, all right."

"Yes, and you did kill him," accused Ranchester. "I know it, and you know it. What's the use of being mealy-mouthed about it?"

"No, I didn't!" protested Webb, as Rose gazed at him anxiously. "There was somebody got ahead of me."

"Well, why isn't it all right, then, to go down and say that you did it?" argued Ranchester. "You had the intention, and when it comes to right and wrong the intention means as much as the deed. You went out to kill him, and some one beat you to it. That man was not Bill Dhue. He has assured me on his honor that he did not kill that boy. If you won't speak, you are hanging an innocent man. If you make a confession, whether you did it or not, that will save Bill and get him a new trial. All I ask is a square deal. I'll pay for it liberally, but I want you to keep your promise."

Webb shifted his feet uneasily, glancing across at Prairie Rose, who was debating the question in her mind.

"Here comes somebody else," spoke up Leslie.

Looking up the road, they saw a horseman whipping toward them at a gallop.

"It's Al Hardigan!" exclaimed Webb.

Ranchester knew in an instant that in some way his plans had become known. Al Hardigan had learned that he was trying to win over Webb Heminway, and had come to snatch away his witness.

"Now here!" the ranchman said to Webb. "Speak quick—yes or no. Will you come with me to town for five thousand dollars, or will you stay and lose every cent?"

"Why—yes," gulped Webb. "That is, of course—"

"Don't you do it!" broke in Prairie Rose.

"You mind your own business!" snapped Ranchester.

The girl whirled on him angrily.

"You mind yours!" she said. "I guess he's my brother. If he confesses to this murder, they may take him and hang him. That's what they're going to do to Bill Dhue."

"No, they're not," declared Ranchester; "not if I can prevent it. Oh, damn it all, here comes that ass Hardigan!"

"Yes, you bet I'm coming!" panted Hardigan, stepping down from his tottering horse. "Whoa, Billy!" But his horse had sunk down. "Well, killed a horse," he observed, as the spent animal gasped for breath; "but there'll be horses after

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I'm dead. The point is, Mr. Ranchester, I'm here!"

"So I see," returned Ranchester.

"I hear," Hardigan went on, turning to Webb, "that this man is trying to get you to confess. That the fact? Well, listen to me. You confess to this murder, whether you did it or not, and they'll hang you as quick as that!"

He snapped his fingers so viciously that Webb jumped and turned pale. Prairie Rose glanced accusingly at Ranchester, who was sitting on his horse, gazing coldly into space, his eyes big with impotent rage.

"When you have finished," he said to Hardigan, "I'd like to explain to this young man the cause of your touching solicitude. He may think right now, seeing the poor horse that you've ridden to death, that you did it to save him from prison. The real reason is that you sold Dhue for a thousand dollars, and you're afraid that you'll lose the money. For a thousand dirty dollars you have sent an old comrade to be hanged, and you're afraid that the truth might clear him."

"I ain't afraid of nothing of the kind!" retorted Hardigan hotly. "I heard you had it framed to hang this boy in his place, and I think there's been enough boys killed!"

"If you're referring to Eddie Yaples, you've come to the wrong place. Just the day before the killing he tried to shoot Webb Heminway, so that bid for sympathy will fall flat."

"Flat or not," returned Hardigan, "I've come up here as an officer to warn this young man against you. You was overheard in the county jail conspiring with Bill Dhue to force this young man here to confess. Very well, if he did it, let him come through and say so, and I'll arrest him and take him to town. I'd just as soon see him hung for that thousand dollars reward as I would Bill Dhue, or any other man."

"Yes, you unprincipled scoundrel," railed Ranchester bitterly. "You'd betray your best friend for a nickel. All you want is the dirty money!"

"And I'll get it, too," replied Hardigan, pouting out his double chin and thrusting his jaw forward defiantly. "Now, young man," he went on, turning to glower at Webb, "what's the word with you on this charge? Did you kill Eddie Yaples, or was it Bill Dhue? Speak up! All we want is the truth!"

"No, sir," quavered Webb. "I never done it."

"Well, did you tell Mr. Ranchester that it was you that done it? Speak up! All we want is the truth!"

"No, sir," repeated Webb. "I never done it."

"Very well, then," observed Hardigan, "I won't place you under arrest—that is, unless Ranchester requests it."

He turned an inquiring eye on Ranchester, who answered with a disdainful smile.

"Certainly not," he said.

The ranchman was turning his horse to go when the Preacher came hurrying around the corner.

"What's all this?" he demanded, looking from one man to the other, and then back at Prairie Rose. "What are these men doing here on my land?"

"I come up here, Mr. Heminway," answered Hardigan importantly, "as a deputy sheriff and officer of the law. This gentleman is Mr. Ranchester, your good neighbor to the south, and he come up to git your boy hung."

He pointed to Webb. Heminway started back, his eyes fixed intolerantly on Ranchester.

"I can well believe it," he said in measured tones. "He has always been against me; but the first time I met him the Lord judged between us, and I have never feared him since. Yea, the Lord will requite him for his wickedness and blasphemy. God is not mocked, and the wicked man shall not prosper."

"Kindly spare us the homily," scoffed Ranchester. "Are you the vicegerent of God?"

"I am His servant," returned Heminway, letting out his big voice in a blare like the sound of a trumpet. "I must ask you, Mr. Ranchester, what you are doing on my land, when I have pointedly ordered you off of it!"

"I came up here," answered Ranchester, with biting courtesy, "to make a certain proposition to your son. We had barely come to an agreement when your daughter butted in—and then, of course, Mr. Hardigan. Being his father, you were not consulted. The deal is off, so good day!"

He gathered up his reins as if to go, but Heminway held up his hand.

"What was the proposition you made to my son?" he demanded. "Perhaps it can be reconsidered."

"I doubt it," replied Ranchester; "but if you will step down the road, I will explain it as briefly as possible. If we remained here," he added, glancing rancorously about, "I would hardly get started before your daughter and Mr. Hardigan would interrupt."

"What is it?" asked the Preacher, walking swiftly along beside him.

Ranchester grasped at a straw. After all his prayers and preaching at that memorable first meeting, when he had called on God to destroy his enemies, Levi Heminway had revealed his inner self. He had demanded damages for the hay that Ranchester's cattle had trampled and the fence that their stampede had broken down—a thousand dollars damages. Ranchester had refused to pay him; but perhaps it was not too late.

"Mr. Heminway," he said, "we've had our differences in the past—no matter about that now. I came up here this morning and offered your son a thousand dollars to do me a trifling favor. No danger was involved, and he had agreed to take the money, when your daughter horned in on the game. Now comes Al Hardigan — I trust you know his reputation—and claims I'm trying to get Webb hung; but what I ask is very little compared to the reward, which I have raised to five thousand dollars. If you like, I'll pay it to you."

"Five thousand dollars!" exclaimed Heminway, suddenly coming to a stop and regarding Ranchester with covetous eyes. Then his face became grim. "But what for, sir?" he demanded. "What for?"

"For confessing the truth," returned Ranchester gravely. "I can promise that he will be granted a full pardon. I want your son to confess that he killed Eddie Yaples."

"My son?" cried Heminway, starting back and beginning to shout. "You want him to swear away his life? Not for a thousand times that sum! May the Lord requite you for what you have done this day! I see it all now—and you are trying to use my son to save your hired murderer from his punishment. You are trying to get him hung in place of Dhue."

"Nothing of the kind!" answered Ranchester. "Bill Dhue is innocent, and in trying to save his life I am doing only what is right. He was trapped into a confession by that venal detective behind you, who claims he is trying to save your son. Instead of that, he is trying to hang an innocent man for a paltry thousand dollars reward. You may believe him if you wish, but I know the truth, and Bill Dhue did not kill Eddie Yaples. I would rather die myself than see him hung for a crime he never committed; and that is the reason why I have come with this offer, no matter what Hardigan says."

He paused abruptly and wiped the sweat from his brow. The Preacher stepped back and smiled.

"I thank God," he said, folding his arms on his breast and regarding Ranchester triumphantly, "that at last my prayers have been answered. When I prayed for the lightning to strike you dead, the Lord withheld His hand; but this is your punishment, for your friend shall surely die, and you shall be helpless to save him!"

"He shall not!" cried Ranchester, lashing back at him with curses that cut like the blow of a whip. "You sanctimonious old hypocrite, keep your prayers to yourself, or I'll come back and ram them down your throat!"

"He shall be hung!" pronounced the Preacher, wagging his gray beard impressively. "'Vengeance is mine,' saith the Lord. 'I will repay.'"

"Perhaps, but I will repay you first!" replied Ranchester, and turned his horse away.

XXI

On his tumbled couch at the Circle Dot ranch house George Ranchester lay tossing with a fever. His whole body had been poisoned by the violence of his anger, until at last he had taken to his bed. Even yet, as he writhed and turned fretfully from side to side, he grumbled and muttered to himself.

"The canting hypocrite!" he cursed. "I'll pay him for this in a way he'll not soon forget! And that hellcat of a girl masquerading as a man—there's a hereafter coming for her, too. Order me off his land, eh? I'll show him whose land it is! I'll leave it as smooth as my hand!"

He turned his face to the wall, and groaned from weakness and the sickness that had poisoned his very soul. As he lay there brooding, there came a knock at the door, repeated again and again.

"Go away!" he stormed. "Go away and leave me alone! Well, come in—what the devil is the matter with you?"

A frightened Chinese cook looked in through the doorway.

"Man here wantee see you," he said.

"Well, tell him I'm sick. Oh, for God's sake, let him in, and stop that everlasting knocking! Come in! What is it you want?"

A pale, slinking man stepped in through the door and glided over toward him.

"Are you Ranchester?" he demanded eagerly.

"Yes, I am, but I'm sick. If you've got any business, kindly go down and transact it with my foreman."

"I've got a letter from Bill Dhue," whispered the man from behind his hand.

Ranchester sat up suddenly.

"Let me have it," he said. As the man seemed to hesitate, he snatched a small package out of his hand. "What's all this?" the ranchman asked, turning over the papers it contained. "I can't make head nor tail of the thing."

"Bill wrote on old letters," explained the messenger, smiling ingratiatingly, "and slipped 'em to me while we was exercising."

"Oh, I see!" nodded Ranchester. "By the way, who are you? I don't think I've seen you before."

"I'm a feller that Afton Cunningham slipped into the jail to get some word out from Bill. They've put a watch on him now—no visitors allowed; so Cunningham comes to me, and he says to me like this:

"'Wilkinson, here's a chance to make some money. I'll have you pinched, understand, for swiping a saddle, and thrown into the county jail; and you pass the word to Bill that I sent you there, see, to frame up a jail break. Then, when you get his plans, make a sign out o' the window, and I'll have the charges dismissed.'

"Pretty smooth, if you ask me; but when Bill gimme the letters, he told me to bring 'em to you."

"Yes, yes—I see," muttered Ranchester absently.

"And he says," added Wilkinson, "you'd slip me a hundred dollars. That's all right, ain't it, mister?"

"Yes, yes," frowned Ranchester. "Hold your tongue for a minute."

He went on poring over the notes. They were scrawled with a stub of pencil on the backs of old envelopes, some addressed to him, and some to the messenger, but all giving directions for the jail break. They were hectic and disjointed, evidently written from day to day, but undated and half illegible. One of them read thus:

> Tell the boys you know exactly what to do and how to do it. All they will have to do is furnish the stuff. Make your talk strong. They are all right, but I can't see them, and my lawyers don't want me to see them. All they think about is getting more fees. To hell with 'em! I must get out of here, or I'll be hung.

"What is it you want?" Ranchester asked the messenger.

Wilkinson sat down on the bed.

"It's this way," he said. "I'm a soup man, see—I blow safes, and that kind of stuff. Over here on this paper it tells what to do. Read that"—and he pointed to a smudged sheet.

Ranchester deciphered Bill Dhue's instructions thus:

> Get five sticks of forty-per-cent dynamite, and hang them against the wall. There's an old door on the west side that's been bricked up. Hang them there, light the fuse, and beat it. I exercise between six and half past six. Blow the wall in, and I will escape. Make it strong, boys—use six sticks of dynamite. If you get this O. K., put a rock on the window sill of the office across the street. I can see that from my cell. Put it there on the day the break will come off. Make it strong, if you blow the whole jail down. Have a horse across the street behind that church, with a six-shooter, grub, and money on the saddle. Once outside this jail, these officers will never get sight of my dust.

"By God," exclaimed Ranchester, "we'll do it!"

"And he says," went on the yegg, "that you'll gimme a hundred dollars to go up to the mines and buy powder. That's O. K., ain't it, Mr. Ranchester?"

"Damn it, yes!" burst out Ranchester. "Stop talking about your money! You'll be paid, and paid well, for your trouble. Now come along with me, and we'll go back to Cheyenne and get this thing started at once."

"Not with you, mister," objected Wilkinson. "Them officers all know me, and they might twig the whole business, see? You ride on the plush and I'll swing under on the rods, and we'll meet outside the station, when we git there."

"Quite right," nodded Ranchester. "I see you're an old hand. Ever do a job like this before?"

"No-o," admitted the yegg, "not exactly like this, but I'm there when it comes to dynamite. Mr. Cunningham picked me up, and I took my orders from him, but Bill Dhue says to come to you. If I pull this, Bill says, there's five thousand dollars in it that he'll collect from some of these rich cattlemen."

"He can collect that much from me," said Ranchester.

The ranchman got up to put on his clothes. His sickness had left him, and, though his limbs were still weak, he harnessed up and drove rapidly to the railroad. The evening train took him and Wilkinson to Cheyenne, where they sought and found Afton Cunningham.

"What's all this?" Cunningham inquired, when Ranchester beckoned him from a saloon and led him to a room up the street. When he saw the yegg, Cunningham glanced at him sharply, and then turned to look at Ranchester. "What's that man doing here with you?" he demanded suspiciously.

The yegg instantly became garrulous.

"It was this way, Mr. Cunningham," he explained. "Bill Dhue, you understand, he told me different. He wrote me out some letters, but he says don't come to you—he says to take 'em to Ranchester. So I swung under the rattler and beats it up to Thunder Mountain—"

"And I brought him back here," ended Ranchester.

"Oh, very well, Mr. Ranchester!" flared up Cunningham. "If you want to take this out of my hands, you're welcome. I suppose you're not satisfied—is that it?"

"No, I'm perfectly satisfied," replied Ranchester. "Don't take any offense, old man. Bill just happened to send him to me, but I brought him right down here, because I realized you had your plans all laid."

"Well, I have," grumbled Cunningham; "but if this is going to be pulled off, it's going to be pulled off by me. Otherwise you can take this yegg and swing the deal yourself."

"Never mind, now," soothed Ranchester. "I'm satisfied."

"And if you or anybody else presumes to dictate to me, or tries to run it over me, I'll—"

"Yes, yes, Cunningham—I understand," broke in Ranchester.

"And you, you hophead!" cursed Cunningham, suddenly turning on the cringing yegg. "Get this now, and get it straight—you're working for *me*. Otherwise you're fired—understand?"

"All right, mister," replied Wilkinson. "Here's the letters from Bill Dhue. He slipped 'em to me while we was exercising."

Cunningham grabbed the papers roughly. As he held them to the light, Ranchester could see that his hands trembled violently. He read over the letters, scowling and blinking as he studied the words out. Then he turned and jerked his head fiercely at Wilkinson.

"You get out of here," he ordered, "and come back in half an hour. Don't you listen through that keyhole," he added. "Now, then," he said, when the two ranchmen were alone, "let's come to a showdown, Mr. Ranchester. If you don't trust my judgment, I want to know it, right now. If you do—hands off! Understand?"

"I understand," replied Ranchester quietly.

"And if you think for a minute you can pull this play off better—"

"Not at all—not at all. Let's get to business."

"The business is this," stated Cunningham. "I've got a carefully arranged plan for pulling off this jail break. It's the last chance that Bill Dhue has, and it's got to be handled quietly, without arousing any more suspicion, or it 'll land us all in jail. I'm doing the fixing, and I'm game to take the chances, but I won't be interfered with in the least. Certain men must be approached, certain money must be passed, and I won't give an accounting to any one. Are you game to put up the money?"

"How much?" inquired Ranchester guardedly.

"Ten thousand dollars, and you can take the offer or leave it. All I say is, it's Bill Dhue's last chance."

"What do you plan to do—blow in the side of the building? That man seems kind of twitchy, Afton."

"He's my man," retorted Cunningham. "Didn't he bring out this message? Well, I've picked him to blow in the wall."

"I'm not questioning your judgment, but mightn't it be better to pay him off and get another man?"

"That's your privilege," replied Cunningham. "You can fire him, if you want to—but when you fire him, you fire me."

"I'm afraid of him," muttered Ranchester anxiously.

"He's a professional safe cracker—blowed hundreds of safes; and claims he knows all about dynamite. Make up your mind—I'm through!"

He folded his arms and stood waiting his answer.

Ranchester remained in deep thought. Should he trust Bill Dhue's life in the hands of a safe blower and of this man who stood leering before him? Afton Cunningham had been drinking, and in his first outburst of anger he had called Wilkinson a hophead; yet if Ranchester refused their assistance, they would both turn against him, and the jail break would be balked at the start.

" Tell me your plans," he said to Cunningham. " If I believe they are practicable, I'll put up the ten thousand dollars."

" They're practicable," returned Cunningham; " but I won't tell them to any one. All you've got to do is to give me the money and string out a relay of horses. In three weeks' time Bill is due to be hung. They've placed a strong guard over the jail; but give me ten thousand dollars, and no questions asked, and I'll guarantee to turn the trick."

" You are quite certain," inquired Ranchester, " that every detail will be attended to—that this man won't weaken in the pinch? I'll place that powder myself, if you just say the word. Come on—let me do something, Afton!"

" You give me that money and get out of town. If you want to do something, do that."

" Very well!" assented Ranchester, and wrote out the check; but as he passed out his eyes were grim.

XXII

Like a man in a fevered dream, Ranchester hurried back to his ranch to arrange a relay of horses for Bill Dhue's escape. Sleeping and waking, his mind was on the prisoner under sentence of death. Every morning, when he got up, he looked down the road, hoping to see a streamer of dust and Bill whipping toward him in full flight; but the days dragged by, and in the silence of waiting Ranchester was plagued by suspicions and doubts. A dozen times he leaped on his saddle horse to ride down and demand action at once; but each time he turned back and set his teeth to wait, for Cunningham had assigned him his part.

Yet, as he sat there and waited, he imagined Cunningham drinking, passing loutishly from saloon to saloon; and behind him, like a shadow, the thin-faced, spiritless yeggman, dancing attendance on his employer's every whim. And meanwhile, in the jail, Bill Dhue was counting off the days and looking for the stone on the window sill.

In a day and a night Ranchester could have assembled what Dhue had asked for, and blown in the side of the jail; but already eight days had dragged by, each an infinity in itself, and no news had come, good or bad.

The world seemed to have whirled on through æons of time, and every second an agony. At night, in terrified dreams, he saw Bill walking to the scaffold, his elbows pinioned behind him, while Cunningham, Al Hardigan, and a host of strange men pushed him forward. It was Ranchester's fever coming back, and as his temperature mounted he hardly knew the facts from his dreams. Yet he could not rest an instant, but paced constantly to and fro, stroking his horses, examining their saddles, watching the road.

Then the end came as he had dreamed it—a streak of dust in the distance, a rider, leaning forward as he rode; but it was not Bill Dhue. When the messenger drew rein, he handed Ranchester a newspaper in silence. The ranchman's eye fell upon a shrieking headline:

ATTEMPTED JAIL BREAK FOILED!

Ranchester threw the paper down with an oath. Then he snatched it up again, hurrying madly through the verbiage to get the kernel of truth. The yegg had got drunk, and had revealed an alleged plot to the reporter on an evening paper. A hasty search had actually revealed a gunny-sack full of dynamite hung up against the wall of the jail. All that was needed was the touch of a match to have caused a tremendous explosion.

Ranchester threw it down again, shouting curses at the bungler, raising his fists in helpless rage to the blue sky; and then, half from habit, he cursed God in a frenzy, and dared him to strike him dead. He drew a circle and stepped inside of it, as in happier days he had been wont to do when it thundered; and with fists still upraised he called on God, if there was a God, to come down and prove it.

Even as he was blaspheming, he remembered the Preacher's words—that his punishment was to see Bill Dhue hung. God had spared him for that. He had withheld His lightning, and Bill would surely die.

"He shall not!" screamed Ranchester, and fell to the ground as if struck by an unseen hand.

When he awoke, he was changed, though in what way he could hardly tell; but something had happened in that paroxysm of uncontrolled rage that had left him a different man. He was weak, deathly weak, and a black despair had laid hold of him, weighing him down with terrifying thoughts. He could not even curse, for all his savage rage had left him.

He wondered if the Preacher had spoken true. Was it possible that a man so self-righteous and bigoted could speak for God Himself? And was there a God, to punish Ranchester's blasphemy by the cruel death of his friend? He lay in grim silence, turning these questions over in his mind, while the soft-footed Chinaman waited on him.

His doubts were still unanswered when another letter came and brought the strength back to his limbs. It was a note from Bill Dhue, written to pass the eyes of his jailers, yet voicing a last appeal for help.

> DEAR MAJOR:
>
> The sheriff tells me it will soon be all over with me, except the applause part of the game. My lawyers have ditched me, and I'm due to hang next week, unless the Governor grants me a reprieve. I have been informed that it might do me some good to tell all I know, but I can't figure out who would believe anything I said.
>
> I have had a new experience, major. I have become a Christian—an honest one, I hope—and I'm prepared to meet my God. At the same time, I hate to be hung for something I never done, and that's what they're trying to do. Al Hardigan is so scairt he won't get that reward money that he watches me day and night.
>
> I want you to believe me when I tell you again I never killed Eddie Yaples. This is the truth, as I am going to die in ten days, and I wanted to let you know.
>
> It would perhaps be somewhat of a trying meeting for you to come and see me that last day. Do as you like. I'm not going to weaken, but I don't want to cause you any pain. I know you have done your best, so don't feel bad about it.
>
> Good-by, my friend—that's all.
>
> BILL DHUE.

Ranchester read the letter again and laid it down softly. Bill Dhue a Christian, and preparing to die!

He rose up and fought away the thought. Bill was not dead yet. No, and Ranchester would not let him die. He would go to the Governor once more. But no—some secret influence, some sinister, unseen hand, had reached to the highest places. The Governor refused to discuss the subject until the Supreme Court had decided; and to approach a judge to influence his decision would be suicidal.

It was a deadlock, and purposely left so. The same influence which had jumped the trial to the head of the calendar, and had had Dhue tried and convicted in a few weeks, had slowed down the wheels of justice to their customary grind, holding them back for some purpose obscurely hid.

Could it be that the cattlemen who had hired Dhue for years, and whose secrets he was able to disclose, were planning some desperate coup to save his life at the last minute, in spite of the popular clamor? Or had they, more desperately, planned to cut off his life, hanging him swiftly with his secrets untold?

Ranchester rose up from his bed and reached resolutely for his clothes, for the time had come to act. It was life or death now, and they were hanging an innocent man—but one way lay open to him yet.

For one brief hour he had held victory in his hand, and then a woman had shattered his hopes. Webb Heminway had confessed that he had gone out to kill Eddie Yaples; he had agreed to confess to it all; and then, as if an invisible skein had drawn him back from his resolution, he had asserted his innocence and refused to speak. But the facts were the same, and human nature was the same—why not go back and try it once more?

Ranchester tottered out unsteadily and swung up on his horse. As he rode, his lost strength returned. The deadly apathy left him, and he felt a new hope within him. His friend should not die!

If there was a God, and Bill was a Christian, that was all the more reason to spare him; but if there was not, he, Ranchester, would take God's place. He would seek out the guilty and save the life of the innocent. God or no God, he would fight for his friend.

But the fates were against him, for, as he dipped down into Thunder Basin, he met Prairie Rose in the road. There was a clatter of hoofs behind him, a band of horses went rushing past, and in their wake followed Prairie Rose. He reined out of the road to let her go by, but the woman in her balked him again. As she came up beside him, she noted his wan face, and stopped her horse in his tracks.

"What's the matter?" she asked. "Are you sick?"

"No, I am quite well, thank you," he answered stiffly. "Don't let me detain you, Miss Heminway."

"Oh, you're not detaining me," she said. "I was just driving those horses off the rim. Come on down here to the spring."

She spurred ahead impulsively. As he followed along behind her, Ranchester shook his head and smiled wryly. He was weak, he had to admit; but what had sapped the last of his strength was the sight of Prairie Rose herself. It had brought boding fears to his heart.

Yet, since he had met her instead of Webb, he was determined to make the best of it; and perhaps, after all, it was for the best. Sooner or later, following her nature, she would take charge of the proceedings and tell Webb whether to go or to stay. Why not have it out with her now,

The ranchman dismounted at the spring and took a drink of the cold water that gushed out from among the stones. Then, seeing her watching him, he steadied himself gently and sat down against the bank.

"You've been sick," she said, almost accusingly.

"Even so, what does it matter?" he sighed. "You look the picture of health."

She stepped down from her horse. As she knelt to drink, he noticed again how ragged she was. Her battered sombrero had been stitched along the rim; and beneath the man's jumper he spied a faded shirt, which also had been made for a man. Except for her long hair and delicately shaped hands, she had lost all outward semblance of a woman; and something in her walk, as she strode about in the worn chaps, reminded him uncomfortably of a cowboy.

When she glanced up, however, reading the disapproval in his grim eyes, he realized once more that she was a woman. Beneath her coat of tan a rosy red flush mounted up, and her dark eyes suffused with tears. For a moment she looked at him, and then she turned away.

Ranchester was quick to make amends.

"I'm afraid," he said, "that I owe you an apology for the rough way I spoke the other day; but I see you don't hold it against me."

"No, I don't," she answered tartly. "I'm used to it."

"What I mean is," he explained, "that when you thought I was sick, you were kind enough to take me to this spring."

"Oh!" she murmured, and nodded shortly.

"I am a little weak," he admitted, "having just got up from a sick bed. I had some kind of a fever, I don't know what, but I'm sure I'll be all right now."

She glanced at him inquiringly, but did not offer to go, and he took it for a good omen.

"I wonder," he began, with the ghost of a smile, "if you meant all you said the other day. I'll admit I was a little nettled when I found you had interfered and prevented Webb from keeping his promise. I apologize for anything I may have said, but I hope you don't think that I had any intention of getting Webb into trouble. Now that we happen to be together, we might as well talk this over frankly, because I'm going down to see your brother again. I'm sure, if you knew all the angles of the case, you would advise Webb to go back with me and confess. That is what I would do if I were in his position, and I don't see how you can wish otherwise. Of course, he's your brother, and you naturally want to protect him; but that's just the way I feel about Bill Dhue. If he had killed Eddie Yaples, I wouldn't feel so bad about it; but honestly, it's driving me mad. I can't sleep from thinking that in ten days he'll be hung, unless I do something to save him."

He passed his hand over his brow, and she regarded him anxiously, though the look in her eyes never changed. She was against him, and Ranchester knew it.

"I wouldn't have to come to you," he continued wearily, "if I could get a fair hearing in Cheyenne; but there's not a man there, from the Governor down, that will look at this case on its merits. They're all in a conspiracy to get Bill hung. They won't even grant him a new trial. Now I'm not asking any favors that I'm not willing to pay for, and in this case you can set your own price; but I want you, Miss Heminway, to use your influence with your brother to get him to confess what he's done. All I ask is for simple justice. If you'll do this much for me, I'll—I'll never forget it, Prairie Rose!"

He gazed at her pleadingly, and, when he called her Prairie Rose, his voice suddenly changed and grew gentle. For a moment he seemed to step outside of his austere self, and to stand before her almost as a lover. There was about him an appeal that made her heart beat strangely, but she shook her head and looked away.

"I don't want to argue with you," she said; "but I can't do what you say. It isn't right. I know we are poor, and need the money you would give us; but Webb is my brother, and if he confessed to the murder I'm afraid—I'm afraid they might hang him."

"No, they won't! They can't!" he insisted. "You know yourself he would get off. Didn't Eddie try to shoot him? And think of the provocation! All I want is a new trial for Bill. If he killed Eddie Yaples, I'm willing that he should suffer for it; but they trapped him into a confession, and, now that they've got him convicted, the Supreme Court won't give him another chance. If Webb would confess just what he did, and no more, then they'd *have* to give Bill a new trial. If you'll get him to do so, I'll be your debtor for life. Anything that I've got, you can have."

"I don't want it," she said. "This isn't a matter of money. The time has come when your money will buy you nothing; and I'm glad of it, after all that you've done. When you came through our meadow with all your cattle, and drove off our horses and cows, you laughed at my father when he stood out and prayed and asked God to look down and punish you. Then you and Afton Cunningham hired Bill Dhue to come in here and drive all us settlers out. Maybe he didn't kill Eddie Yaples, but didn't he kill Murray and Chris Klein? You know it just as well as I do! Bill Dhue is a murderer, and he deserves to be hung—and you deserve to be punished. God is not mocked, after all, and while I'm sorry to see you suffer—"

"Oh, of all the sickening cant!" exploded Ranchester. "Do you actually believe what you say?"

"Yes, I do!" she declared. "I knew from the first that some terrible punishment would come to you. You treated us like dirt, and when father prayed—"

"Now look here!" he broke in. "You seem to be a sensible girl, except when you're on this subject. In all his life, while he's been trying to pray men dead, did your father ever have a prayer answered? I don't mean equivocally, or in some roundabout way."

"Yes, he did," she answered decidedly. "When we were back in Nebraska, he borrowed some money, and the banker tried to take away our property. Father prayed all the time for nearly a month, and then the banker was struck blind. He was sitting at his desk in the bank."

"Yes, but did your father pray to have him struck blind, or did he pray to have him struck dead?"

"He prayed to have him punished," replied Prairie Rose resolutely. "And he was punished—worse than he dreamed of. It isn't so bad to be just struck dead."

"You're begging the question," argued Ranchester. "If you seize upon every affliction to which human flesh is heir—"

"I don't care—you'll be punished!" she interrupted. "You're being punished now, and you'll keep on being punished until you repent and ask forgiveness. You ought to be ashamed of hiring Bill Dhue to shoot down people from ambush. I guess, when he comes out and tells all he knows—"

"Dhue will never do that," contradicted Ranchester.

"Well, why won't he?" she demanded hotly.

"Because," he replied, "strange as it may seem to you, Bill Dhue is a man of honor. He'll go further for a friend than all the psalm-singing hypocrites in the world. That's my test of a man—what he'll do for his friends; and it's my test of a woman, too."

He rose up grimly and went to his horse. Prairie Rose stared in alarm. In that moment of defeat he had suddenly become old and stooping. When he mounted, he sat swaying on his horse; but his eyes, once so debonair, were bleak and forbidding, and he looked down at her with an angry scowl.

"You've hung Bill Dhue!" he blazed forth. "Just as surely as if you'd been there and sprung the trap under him, you've hung him—and all from your petty woman's spite. If you had just said the word, or even minded your own business—"

"But it was my own business," she flared back.

"I've never seen a woman yet," he said, "that would keep where she belonged. You've meddled in everything, and now, as a result of it—"

"And I've never seen a man," she came back spitefully, "that ever thought about anybody but himself! Just to save Bill Dhue—"

"That's enough!" he cried, holding his hand up for silence. "I'm too sick to listen to your chatter. My friend must die—let that be sufficient, and I hope it makes you happy. To all this damned cant about repentance and punishment I have only one thing to say. If there is a God, He will punish you as you deserve for taking the life of my friend. If there isn't, as I truly and firmly believe, I'll take on the job myself. I will punish you. That is all. Good day!"

He bowed almost decorously, and touched spurs to his horse. Prairie Rose broke down and cried.

XXIII

On his bunk in the steel cell where he awaited the day of his death, Bill Dhue sat poring over a Bible; but the print was too fine for the gloomy prison light, and he laid the book down reluctantly.

Across the street from the jail a merry-go-round had been set up. As he lay there listening, he could hear the whistle blow and the steam calliope begin its one tune. Day and night for a week it had played "La Paloma," oblivious of him and his fate. As he heard the familiar pipings, the urge to live came back to him, and he rose up and began pacing his cell.

"La Paloma" — how often in moonlit Mexican plazas had he heard its haunting strains, and, beneath the strum of guitars and the deep notes of viols, the shuffling of sandaled feet. How often, through the shadows, had he watched the *señoritas* and caught the flash of laughing black eyes! And now, in his prime, he was to be cut off from it all—cut off from life itself.

His pacings grew faster as the old thoughts came back to him, and he began to plot desperately to escape. Three times within a month, when the vacant cell next to him had happened to have an occupant, he had laid plans for a break—a dash at the guard; but each time the plot had been foiled. Two men had betrayed him, the third had been removed, and now Al Hardigan was watching him.

The death watch was set, and as Dhue glanced out through the grating he saw Hardigan approaching.

"What 'll it be, Bill?" inquired Al, in the quiet, impersonal way that he used in talking to his prisoner.

Choking down the black hate that leaped up in his heart, Bill Dhue went over to the door. Al Hardigan held the key that unlocked that cell of death, and his was the hand that must set Dhue at liberty or lead him forth to be hung. Like a man who has caught a king cobra asleep and plunged it into a cage, Al Hardigan watched Bill Dhue, knowing well that the slightest slip would mean a dash to escape. And if Dhue got loose, the first man he would kill would be the one who had trapped him.

"Nothing, Al," he said, "unless you can stop that merry-go-round. That tune has got on my nerves."

"Can't do it," rumbled Hardigan. "He's leased the lot for a month. Ever see one of these guns before?"

He drew out a blunt-nosed pistol, with one barrel under the other, and the handle set on almost at right angles. Dhue stared at it, open-eyed.

"What kind of a hog's leg is that?" he asked.

Hardigan grinned knowingly.

"This is one of them new automatics," he said. "Fires ten shots as fast as a man can pull the trigger, and is sighted up to a thousand yards."

"I don't believe it!" exclaimed Dhue incredulously.

"Shoots a hole plumb through a cottonwood tree, and kills on the other side."

"How does it work?" inquired Dhue curiously.

"Never you mind about that," replied Hardigan. "It works, and don't you forget it!"

He thrust the weapon back into its holster, and went pounding down the iron stairs, while Bill Dhue resumed his pacing. The sight of the pistol, held so tantalizingly before his eyes, had roused the old lust to kill. He lashed back and forth like a tiger in its cage when it catches the smell of hot blood; but at the clang of the inner door he stopped in his tracks, and looked out to see a new prisoner coming in.

The newcomer was a big man like Dhue himself, tall and rangy and full of fight, and a deputy United States marshal walked beside him. Bill watched them intently as the prisoner was led up the stairs and thrust inside the steel door. Then, when the man had been locked in the cell beside Bill's own, Dhue rose up and regarded him with curiosity.

Twice already in his brief incarceration they had put stool-pigeons in that cell to spy on him; but one look at the grim face of this Federal prisoner convinced Dhue that he was a desperate man.

"What you in for?" he asked.

The man gazed hard at him.

"Train robbing—United States mail."

"That's from twenty years to life," nodded Dhue. "I'm sentenced to be hung, myself."

"You're Bill Dhue, eh? I've heard of you;" and the new prisoner looked him over appraisingly.

"Are you game?" whispered Dhue from behind his hand.

"For anything," answered the outlaw briefly. "My name's Kennedy. You might 've heard of me."

"Many's the time" grinned Dhue. "Stopping long?"

"Over Sunday—while the deputy gits drunk."

Dhue looked down the stairway and up and down the jail, then stepped back and put his mouth close.

"They's stools down below us," he whispered. "Don't talk till that merry-go-round starts up."

They waited in tense silence until the shrill whistle of the starter summoned a blare from the raucous steam calliope. Then, mouth to ear, they talked back and forth, stopping abruptly at the last piping note.

"You play sick," instructed Dhue. "I've got it all figured out. That big fat man is Al Hardigan, my guard. He's the son of a goat that framed me, and he thinks he's going to hang me—took the job to touch off the drop. You stay with me, pardner, and we'll rush him at the door and make a clean git-away with his keys. I'll jest stop long enough to kill him!" added Bill.

When the music started again, Dhue continued his instructions.

"To-morrow's Sunday. Everything is quiet—no deputies around. No court, you understand, and no call for prisoners. We'll lay for him in the morning, after breakfast. These are interlocking doors—both open at once when he pulls that lever outside; but the outer door opens with a key. You play sick after breakfast. Ask him to bring you a pitcher of hot water, and we'll jump him when he sets it inside."

They talked back and forth out of the corners of their mouths, their eyes on the lookout for spies. When evening came, Kennedy lay back on his bunk, moaning faintly, and refusing his food.

"What's the matter with you?" Hardigan demanded roughly, jerking open the steel door, after locking both their cells from the outside.

The train robber looked up from his bunk.

"I'm sick," he answered.

"Aw, you just think you're sick!" grumbled Hardigan, and went out with the untouched meal.

But in the morning, when he saw the prisoner's breakfast untasted, he went in and peered through the door. Kennedy was lying on his couch, huddled up under a blanket, and this time he did not even look up.

"Anything special you want?" Hardigan asked at last, and Kennedy stirred and groaned.

"I've got the belly-ache," he complained. "I wish you'd bring me a pitcher of hot water."

Hardigan grunted and went out, carrying the uneaten breakfast. Dhue and Kennedy listened as he clumped down the stairs. The inner door clanged behind him as he went back to the kitchen, and the prisoners straightened up with a jerk.

"Wait till you hear him set down the pitcher," whispered Dhue, and the train robber nodded and lay back.

Once more the inner door clanged, and with slow and ponderous steps Al Hardigan mounted the stairs with his pitcher. Breakfast having been served, he had unlocked the sliding doors that gave the prisoners access to the runway; and now, without thinking, he unlocked the outer door and slipped the pitcher inside.

"Here's your water!" he called.

With a pounce like a leaping lion, Bill Dhue hurled himself against the door. At the impact of his body Hardigan staggered backward, clutching the railing of the gangway to keep from falling. The next instant the train robber added his weight to Dhue's, almost knocking the keeper off the gangway.

"I've got 'im!" panted Bill Dhue, grabbing his enemy by the throat.

As they grappled on the stairway, Kennedy leaped on top of them, and they went bumping and tumbling to the bottom. For all his heavy paunch, Al Hardigan fought back with a rugged strength that surprised them. The three men struggled on the floor, while the other prisoners yelled and hammered on the doors of their cells. First Dhue was on top, and then Hardigan got to his feet, to be pounced on by the desperate train robber; but in the end weight told, and, with Dhue still at his throat, Hardigan relaxed and gave up the fight.

"Git his keys!" directed Dhue.

As Kennedy reached for his pockets, Hardigan suddenly regained his voice.

"No use, boys," he gasped. "They're locked up in the safe. You're trapped, so you might as well give up!"

"Trapped — hell!" retorted Dhue. "Don't you know the combination? Well, come out here and open it up!"

He jerked Hardigan to his feet, and, with Kennedy to help him, rushed the struggling officer down the corridor. When they entered the empty office, Kennedy let go of Hardigan and made a jump for a rifle in the rack.

"Now!" he said, with a curse, jabbing the muzzle against Hardigan. "You open up that safe, and open it quick, or I'll blow the top of your head off!"

"All right, boys," panted Hardigan, kneeling down before the safe.

As they stood over him, trembling with excitement, he began to fumble at the combination, puffing and struggling to get back his breath.

"Somebody's been fooling with this safe," he complained, as his first efforts failed to open the door. "Gimme a chance, boys!"

With every appearance of frantic haste, he spun the disk back and forth.

"You can't stall on me!" burst out Kennedy, suddenly sensing Al Hardigan's intent. "Open that safe, or I'll blow your brains out! He's playing for time, Bill!"

"Here! Gimme that gun!" answered Dhue.

Hardigan opened the door, but, instead of the keys, he grabbed out his automatic pistol and whirled to shoot them down. There was a thud as Kennedy's gun barrel descended on his head.

As Bill Dhue leaped upon him and tried to wrench away the pistol, the jail keys fell out of Hardigan's pocket, where they had been hidden all the time. The train robber saw them fall, and snatched them up with an oath, leaving Dhue still wrestling for the pistol. Without a second look he started for the door, then leaped back and threw up his rifle.

There was a rattle of heavy keys, and the jail door swung open, letting in the startled undersheriff.

"Put 'em up!" ordered Kennedy.

At sight of the outlaw's gun, the undersheriff ducked back and ran. Kennedy darted out after him, turning to rush out by the back way as he heard shots and yells from the front.

Meanwhile, back in the office, Dhue and Hardigan fought and scrambled, still fighting for the automatic pistol. Grasping it firmly in both hands, Hardigan crouched on the floor, and fired twice as he jerked the gun loose; but each time Dhue, riding him down from behind, twisted his gun hand farther back. Bill grabbed the pistol with one hand, and had almost jerked it loose when Hardigan feigned to give up.

"Well, if you want the gun," he said, "quit twisting my hand, and I'll give it to you!"

Dhue gave a final wrench and then relaxed his grip. Hardigan let go of the gun; but as he handed it over, he pushed up the safety catch, and made a quick jump to one side. Down came the gun, and as he saw his enemy over the barrel Bill Dhue pulled the trigger twice, but the pistol failed to explode.

"Damn the hog's leg!" he cursed, and rushed out of the building.

The fire bell was ringing furiously. Men were running to and fro with shotguns and pistols, all shouting, all looking on every side; and as he dodged out by the back door, which Kennedy had left open, Dhue became a part of the riot. It was a general alarm, but he still had a chance, and he rushed to get the sheriff's horse.

Day and night Sheriff Adams kept a horse saddled and bridled in the stable just behind the jail. Dhue was running for the door, when, looking up the alley, he saw the sheriff crouching behind a post. His pistol was out, but it was pointed the other way, and as Dhue stopped short he fired.

Dhue saw a man on a horse suddenly collapse and go down, and he knew that Kennedy had been shot; but there was still a chance for himself. Ducking around the corner, he started up the street on the run.

It was the same broad street that led northward out of town, toward Thunder Mountain and the Circle Dot; but his fight with Hardigan had left Dhue panting and wind-broken, and he staggered at every step.

An excited man rushed up to him, brandishing a rifle and yelling. Dhue nodded and pointed up the street.

"Bill Dhue's out!" the fugitive shouted, and the man ran past, while Dhue kept on to the north.

It was only a half a block till he came to the vacant lot where the merry-go-round was located. He halted, breathing heavily, his eyes roving wildly, and at that moment the engineer stepped out — the man who had run the calliope.

"Throw up your hands!" he yelled, catching sight of the escaping prisoner.

As Dhue turned to run, the engineer fired. Dhue felt the bullet pass, and tottered along up the street, with his pursuer shouting behind him. The engineer was a little man in a greasy skullcap, and his pistol was scarcely more than a popgun; but as he came in pursuit he seemed more terrible and vindictive than any man Bill Dhue had ever known.

"Throw up your hands!" he yelled, and fired again.

Bill Dhue stumbled and fell, but he was not hit. His legs had simply crumpled beneath him, and he rose up, pointing his automatic. Three times he pulled the trigger, each time harder and harder, and then the little man fired back. The small-calibered bullet struck Dhue on the head, just grazing the top of his scalp, and he fell forward like a dead man. All his strength was gone. He could not move a hand, and the engineer leaped upon him. Raising his empty pistol, he beat Dhue furiously over the head with it.

As the prisoner was stumbling to his knees, Al Hardigan rushed up and laid him low with a gun barrel. That was the end for Bill Dhue. When he recovered consciousness, he was back in the death cell, and many eyes stared in at him curiously.

XXIV

In the street outside the jail, a crowd of men with guns and pistols had gathered at the ringing of the fire bell; and though the prisoners had been recaptured, the bell still rang, while excited citizens shot off their six-shooters. Rumors swept through the crowd like wind through the grass, swaying them hither and thither with vindictive fury; but the mob lacked a head until Phi Yaples appeared, riding bareback on his buckskin horse. A heavy white bandage still incased his right arm, and his eyes were dancing mad.

"They turned him out!" he yelled, shaking his fist at the jail door. "What kind of a sheriff is that? They turned him loose, I tell ye, and I don't believe they got him back! It's them cattlemen — they're skeered he'll blab!"

He spurred up toward the door of the sheriff's office, now bristling with militia bayonets. As the crowd opened up to let him pass, he continued his wild tirade.

"Let 'em show me Bill Dhue! I want to see him—that's all! I don't believe he's thar. They've turned him loose, I tell ye, before he blabs all he knows, and puts all those cattlemen in jail. They're the devils that hired him, and they think they own this jail, but it belongs to you and me. We pay the taxes in this county, and we're entitled to be represented and to see that jestice is done. What kind of jestice is that when Bill Dhue is turned loose less'n a week before he's to be hung? Didn't I tell ye from the first this jail would never hold him? And hyer he was, runnin' around the streets! The thing to do is hang him now. Ain't he confessed he killed my Eddie? Well, why don't you hang him, then?"

An answering roar went up from the crowd. A rush of men surged forward toward the steel door, but at sight of the bayonets and the armed guards behind it the leaders came to a halt.

"Stand back!" warned the sheriff, looking out through the steel bars. "You'll never get Bill Dhue!"

He gave way immediately to the district attorney, who had been hastily smuggled inside. At sight of the man who had convicted the prisoner, the crowd set up a cheer. He began to speak, advising the mob against violence, and promising that justice should be done; and soon, despite the hooting and harangues of Phi Yaples, the crowd turned away and dispersed.

All Cheyenne was still in a turmoil, however. As the day of the execution drew near, the militia stood guard outside the jail. No visitors were allowed to pass through the lines until they had been searched for arms; and so, one by one, the days dragged by until Friday morning dawned.

It was a cold, bleak day, with no sun in the east to thrust its fingers through the high jail windows. After a restless night, Bill Dhue rose early and ate his last breakfast in silence. Since the day of his recapture he had given up all hope of leaving his prison alive.

As the tall, frocked form of a minister appeared, Bill greeted him with a smile. Face to face with death, his thoughts had leaped ahead, inevitably, to what was beyond; and now, with a faith as naïve as it was honest, he knelt down in his cell to pray. His rugged heart was tamed, and, as the minister pleaded for mercy, he raised his man-killing hands to God.

As he knelt there in silence, he heard a step on the stairway, and rose up to meet the stern eyes of Ranchester.

"Bill," the ranchman began, his voice broken with emotion, "the Governor has refused a reprieve. I have worked day and night, but there's something behind this. There's something that I can't put my hand on."

"Yes, major," replied Dhue, "I've known it from the first. I think it's a punishment for my sins."

"Your sins!" scoffed Ranchester. "What the hell are you talking about? Oh, I beg your pardon!"

He bowed. For the first time he noticed the clergyman.

"Let you out, sir?" inquired the guard, stepping alertly forward.

To the clang of steel and the grinding of locks, the minister gave way to Ranchester. The ranchman strode into the narrow cell, his face drawn with pain. Bill Dhue stared at him, startled.

"You've been sick, major," said Bill. "My God, what's come over you? You ain't been worrying over me?"

"I can't sleep," answered Ranchester. "There's something I can't understand, Bill—something that's keeping you from getting a reprieve. They all take it for granted I ought to know what it is, but not a man will tell me; and I can't make them move—not an inch!"

"It's them lawyers," returned Dhue. "They've crooked me. I was tried, convicted, and hung before I even left the ranch. But don't take on, major—it's all right."

He laid a comforting hand on the drooping shoulder of his friend, and went on with a steady voice.

"It's a punishment," he said. "It's a punishment for my sins. Major, I'm prepared to die. I've known all along I'd never git away—there was always some little thing that kept me, like that catch on Hardigan's pistol. Think of me, major—*me,* with a loaded gun in my hand, and not knowing how to shoot it! Al showed me that gun the day before the break, but he wouldn't show me how it worked; and that little engineer with his thirty-two pea shooter run up and cracked me over the head! There's something against me, major, and I think it's the hand of God, reaching down to punish me for my sins."

"You do?" exclaimed Ranchester, and laughed harshly. "Don't listen to these preachers—that's all cant!"

"No, it isn't," insisted Dhue. "I used to be like you are, but I've changed. I'm a Christian now; and do you know, major, since I've learned the power of prayer, I've wondered about that preacher man up on Chug."

"Wondered what about him?" inquired Ranchester uneasily.

"Well, you know yourself how he could pray—"

"Oh, nonsense!" burst out Ranchester impatiently.

"Yes, and you know," went on Dhue, "how he said we'd be punished for feeding him out like we did. I was in on that myself."

"No, you weren't! He was praying against me."

"Well, anyhow," ended Dhue, "it's all right with me; but don't make any more of them circles, major."

His voice suddenly became soft. As Ranchester met his friend's eyes, the ranchman reached out his hand and nodded.

"Anything for you, Bill!" he said.

They stood there alone in the silence; but as he brushed away the tears, Ranchester heard a heavy thump, and his cheeks went deathly pale.

"It's Hardigan," explained Dhue, "trying out his patent drop. He's going to—do the honors," he added.

"My God!" cried Ranchester. "Has it gone as far as that? Are they fixing the drop to hang you? They're not going to do it, Bill! I'm going back to the Governor. I'll offer him anything—everything—but he's got to grant that reprieve!"

"He won't do it," answered Dhue. "They're going to hang me, major. Would you mind—just being there, major?"

"I'll be there with a reprieve!" declared Ranchester. "Let me out of this! Hurry! Hurry!"

He hammered on the door. The guard passed him out, rushing off angrily, and never looking back once. As Bill Dhue gazed after him, he smiled to himself and muttered an admiring oath.

"Dead game!" he said.

He paced to and fro, oblivious to the gallows knockings. For the moment he forgot the spite of Al Hardigan and the treachery and neglect of his friends. He was a soldier once more, and Ranchester was his commander, leading him on into the jaws of death.

There was a clang at the inner door, and an armed guard of militiamen marched in and stood at attention. Then the sheriff and his deputies walked into the gloomy cell room, followed closely by the crowd of invited guests. They filed across the room and stood huddled before the gallows, where Al Hardigan was still testing the drop.

Hardigan was stripped to his shirt sleeves. As he hurried up and down, his huge paunch trembled pendulously, but his step was firm and sure. As he glanced at the crowd, he nodded easily to chance acquaintances. There was almost a swagger as he bustled about, inspecting the hidden mechanism of his trap. When the reporters approached, he showed its workings in grim pantomime, for the jail was deathly still.

Beneath the floor of the platform he had arranged an automatic release, whereby the weight of the prisoner started a flow of water into a tank, which, when filled, suddenly dropped the trapdoors. Even at that hour, when the hardiest men turned pale, Al exhibited the mechanism like a plaything. With an instinctive repulsion, the reporters drew away from him, turning their eyes to Bill Dhue's death cell, before which a broad piece of canvas had been hung up, to cut off the gruesome sight of the scaffold.

As the spectators watched Hardigan at work, they sensed the venomous spite which lay behind his pretended industry; but if Bill Dhue noticed it he gave no sign. Hardigan owed him no mercy. On the Sunday of the jail break, Dhue had wrenched Al's pistol away from him and tried twice to shoot him down. But for the safety catch, Hardigan would be a dead man, and Bill Dhue would probably be free; but fate had decided against him, and the hand of God had reached down and punished him for his sins. Now, as the hour of his dissolution drew near, he picked up his Bible and prayed.

The clock on the courthouse tower clanged out the hour of eleven. There was a stir, and the sheriff nodded. The grim-faced officers and visiting sheriffs raised their eyes with one accord, and Bill Dhue stepped out of his cell. For a minute he stood looking, searching the crowd for one friendly face; and at that moment George Ranchester burst in. The major held his head up proudly, but his face was pale and drawn, and Dhue read his fate at a glance. Ranchester had failed, and he must die.

"All right, officer!" he said.

Walking down the narrow stairs, he mounted to the gallows platform. Behind him followed the sheriff, accompanied by Al Hardigan, who bore a red bag. Six men with cocked rifles stood near. Despite a thousand rumors, no rush was made to save the prisoner. He stood alone, looking at the gallows.

"Pretty good!" he said, nodding approvingly to Hardigan.

A sigh went up from the crowd. Bill Dhue's nerve was unshaken. He would die game.

"Mr. Dhue," began the sheriff, "if you've got any statement to make—"

He paused, and the crowd stood expectant. If Bill was really guilty, the time had come for him to confess the truth before he met his Maker.

As he scanned the grim faces that looked up into his, Dhue glanced at Ranchester and smiled.

"I did have a statement to make," he said. "I intended to tell all I know about certain things; but, boys, I've changed my mind. I'm trying to act like a Christian. I forgive all my enemies, and I want to thank my friends. That's all, Mr. Sheriff —go ahead!"

"Just a moment," spoke up Ranchester, as a murmur ran through the crowd. "May I speak to the prisoner, sheriff?"

The sheriff nodded, and the major strode up the stairs.

"Bill," he said, "I want to ask you a question. Did you confess to that preacher that you killed Eddie Yaples? The Denver papers say that you did."

"I did not," replied Dhue. "I confessed my sins, but I never killed Eddie Yaples."

"I knew it!" exclaimed Ranchester, and held out his hand. "Good-by, Bill," he said, and smiled.

They clasped hands in silence. Ranchester descended from the platform, while Dhue walked over to the trap.

"Do a good job, Al," the ranchman said, as Hardigan approached with his bag. "I'd do as much for you!"

"I believe it," rumbled Hardigan.

Opening up the bag, he fetched out his hangman's straps. While the crowd looked on in silence, he fastened Dhue's legs and strapped his arms behind his back, at the elbows. Then, with a swift reach above him, he brought down the hangman's noose and slipped it over Dhue's head. He drew the knot tight, and, at a signal from the sheriff, dropped the black cap over the prisoner's head.

"Are you ready, Bill?" he asked, backing off to survey his handiwork.

"Yes," replied Dhue calmly.

Hardigan stepped forward quickly, and, with the sheriff to help him, lifted the rigid form upon the trap. There was a click, followed by the sound of water running out of a tank, and Bill Dhue stood erect; but the trapdoor did not drop. Al Hardigan, standing with folded arms, smiled and glanced at the crowd.

Like the trickle of a waterfall in a mountain stream, the water flowed on and on. An infinitude of time seemed to pass with every second, but still Bill Dhue stood firm and silent.

A murmur of alarm spread through the crowd. Hardigan's boasted release must have gone wrong; but still Al stood smiling, with his arms across his breast. He was waiting for Dhue's nerve to break.

Twenty seconds ticked by, and thirty, and forty. As the tank beneath the platform became fuller and fuller, the sound of the waterfall deepened. Every second was an agony, but Bill Dhue stood unmoved, as rigid as a man of iron. Then, at forty-nine seconds, the trapdoor gave way beneath him, and a sigh escaped from the crowd.

"He sure died game!" said the sheriff.

Hardigan answered with a shrug.

(*To be concluded in the November number of* MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE)

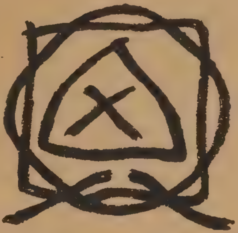
THE BIRD AND THE LOVER

SWEETHEART, there is a bird out there
Who makes it harder still for me
This distance from your side to bear.
His song is like your loosened hair,
And hath in its liquidity
So pure a thrill, I think that he
Sings of your fair remembered face,
That passed once through this leafy place—
With that ecstatic note
Welling like tears from his small magic throat.
Would I might learn from him the art
Of such high music! When apart,
Then might I of my sorrow make
A string of pearls that you might wear
Upon your bosom for my sake;
And you might tell them o'er, and pray
A prayer for me thus far away,
Making thereof a rosary,
Till slow Time brought you back to me.

Meanwhile the bird sings on,
Knowing too well, as I, that you are gone;
And the moon rises through the wood,
And seeks you in her silver hood;
She looks into my lonely eyes,
Then goes her way along the skies.

Richard Le Gallienne

What is *Your* Mark?



IF you have ever laughed over that delightfully whimsical story of Frank Stockton's—"Rudder Grange"—you will remember the tramp who climbed the apple-tree to get away from Lord Edward, the ferocious watch dog.

The man of the house, you recall, came to see what the trouble was all about and the tramp promised "if you'll chain up that dog, and let me go, I'll fix things so that you'll not be troubled no more by no tramps." It was a bargain. The next day a curious mark was discovered cut in a tree at the end of the lane. No tramps appeared that summer.

Weeks later the man noticed another tramp looking at the mark on the tree. He bribed the hobo to tell him what it meant. And he learned that he had been branded as "a mean, stingy cuss, with a wicked dog" and it was "no good to go there."

* * * *

Every shop, every factory, every business has its mark—so that those who know the signs may read. It is the mark given it by its employees. Be sure of this: there is no way to escape the mark that is deserved—whether good or bad.

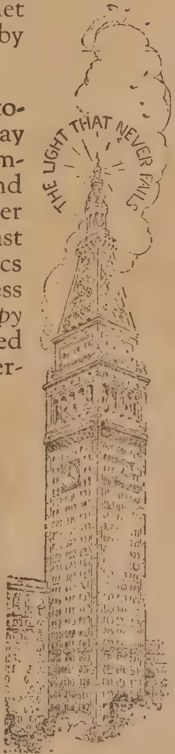
What makes the difference between the two? What gives one a bad mark and another a good mark? The difference is in the business vision and the human kindness of the men at the helm.

* * * *

Business today is undergoing a great change. In this new-day business outlook wise employers do not grind work out of their helpers as though they were machines. A new art has entered business—the art of coöperation.

The employer knows that every single one of his employees has four sides—physical, mental, social and financial. He provides better working conditions. He enables them to earn enough to live decently. He helps them to save. He enlists their intelligence as well as their skill. He knows that they need recreation. He sees that these wants are met and he goes still further by insuring their lives.

It is the dawn of a new tomorrow in business—the day when employers and employees begin to understand each other and plan together for mutual good. Men at last are learning that Humanics plays as great a part in business as Mechanics and that *happy workers* are the big concealed asset in many a business enterprise.


THE LIGHT THAT NEVER FAILS

The Metropolitan Life Insurance Company has searchers constantly at work in all parts of the United States and Canada, gathering data concerning various businesses. It is a giant magnet of business information—a great clearing house of better business ideas.

Every day the Metropolitan receives inquiries from employers for information on what industry is doing to bring employers and employees into closer sympathy by making business more *human*.

One phase of this new concept of business is the importance assumed by Group Insurance. It is life insurance at wholesale rates carried by an employer under one policy covering his employees.

A fine thing about Group Insurance is that it enables people whose physical condition will not permit them to pass a regular examination to be insured without medical examination. Think of the weight of worry this lifts from the men and women who need insurance most and without it must leave their families unprovided for.

Our Policyholders' Service Bureau has prepared reports covering many of the present day business problems—factory management, safety devices, stock purchasing and profit-sharing plans, housing, sanitation, factory routing, etc. Valuable information of this kind is at your disposal and will be mailed on request.

HALEY FISKE, *President.*

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The New Hupmobile

The Sedan body is designed and built in the Hupp shops. To its beauty is added all the strength and lasting qualities that go into the wonderfully long-lived Hupmobile chassis.

From cowl to the higher radiator the line is long and sweeping, and the rear corners are broadly rounded.

Windows are broader and not so high, adding much to the Sedan's attractiveness.

The longer wheelbase and springs give the Sedan, both in front and rear, entirely new and better riding qualities.

With increased engine power, unprecedented smoothness, and far more sprightliness than any Hupmobile before it, driving the Sedan is pure pleasure, even for great distances.

The new clutch and transmission mean silent gear changes, no matter what the speed or circumstance.

There is a harmony of interior and exterior color scheme that is very pleasing.

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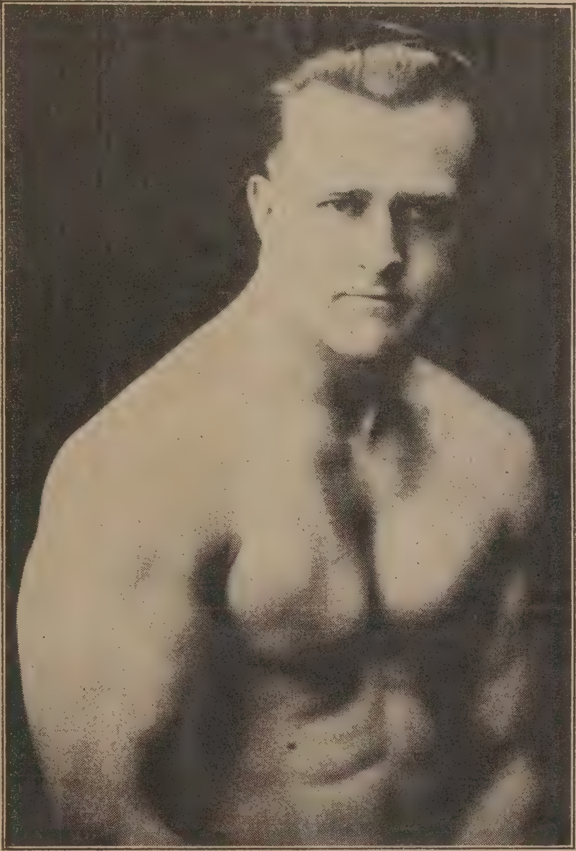
If You Were Dying To-night

and I offered you something that would give you ten years more to live, would you take it? You'd grab it. Well fellows, I've got it, but don't wait till you're dying or it won't do you a bit of good. It will then be too late. Right now is the time. To-morrow or any day, some disease will get you and if you have not equipped yourself to fight it off, you're gone. I don't claim to cure disease. I am not a medical doctor, but I'll put you in such condition that the doctor will starve to death waiting for you to take sick. Can you imagine a mosquito trying to bite a brick wall? A fine chance.



Earle E. Liederman as he is to-day

A Re-built Man

I like to get the weak ones. I delight in getting hold of a man who has been turned down as hopeless by others. It's easy enough to finish a task that's more than half done. But give me the weak, sickly chap and watch him grow stronger. That's what I like. It's fun to me because I know I can do it and I like to give the other fellow the laugh. I don't just give you a veneer of muscle that looks good to others. I work on you both inside and out. I not only put big, massive arms and legs on you, but I build up those inner muscles that surround your vital organs. The kind that give you real pep and energy, the kind that fire you with ambition and the courage to tackle anything set before you.

All I Ask Is Ninety Days

Who says it takes years to get in shape? Show me the man who makes any such claims and I'll make him eat his words. I'll put one full inch on your arm in just 30 days. Yes, and two full inches on your chest in the same length of time. Meanwhile. I'm putting life and pep into your old back-bone. And from then on, just watch 'em grow. At the end of thirty days you won't know yourself. Your whole body will take on an entirely different appearance. But you've only started. Now comes the real works. I've only built my foundation. I want just 60 days more (90 in all) and you'll make those friends of yours who think they're strong look like something the cat dragged in.

A Real Man

When I'm through with you, you're a real man. The kind that can prove it. You will be able to do things that you had thought impossible. And the beauty of it is you keep on going. Your deep full chest breathes in rich pure air, stimulating your blood and making you just bubble over with vim and vitality. Your huge square shoulders and your massive muscular arms have that craving for the exercise of a regular he man. You have the flash to your eye and the pep to your step that will make you admired and sought after in both the business and social world.

This is no idle prattle, fellows. If you doubt me, make me prove it. Go ahead. I like it. I have already done this for thousands of others and my records are unchallenged. What I have done for them, I will do for you. Come then, for time flies and every day counts. Let this very day be the beginning of new life to you.

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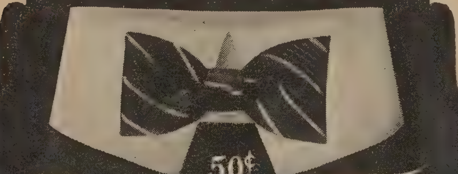

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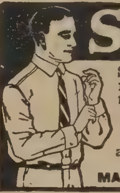

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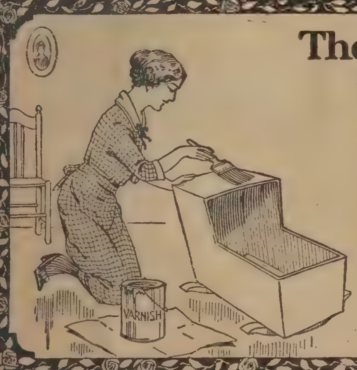

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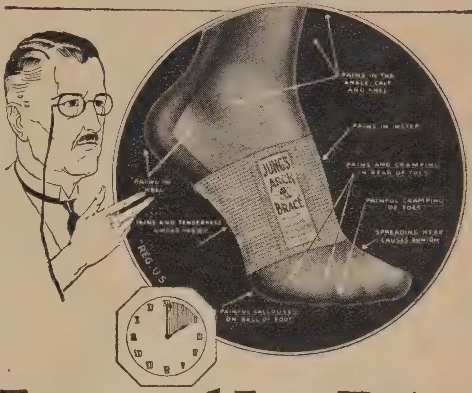
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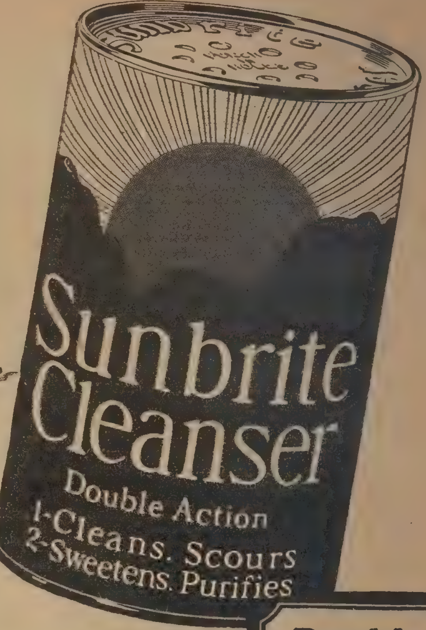

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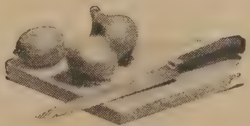

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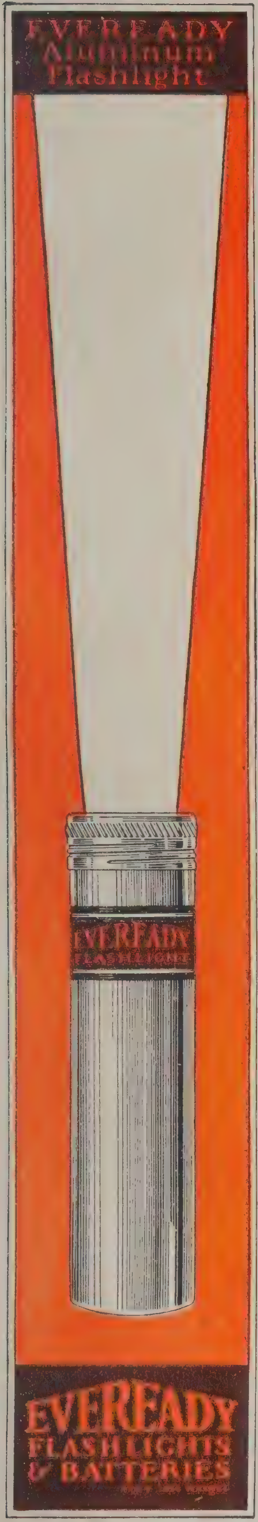

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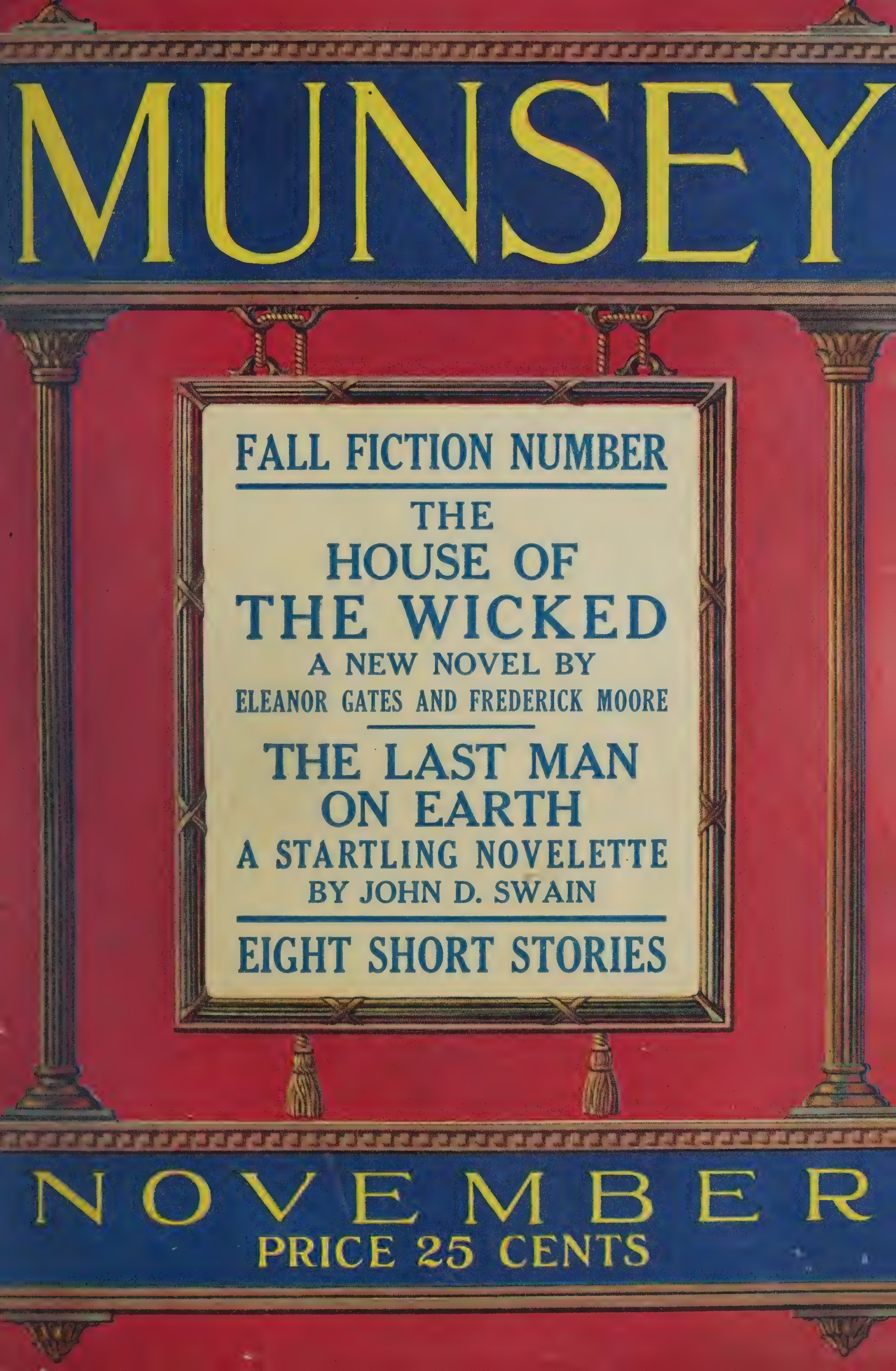

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A NEW NOVEL BY
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A STARTLING NOVELETTE
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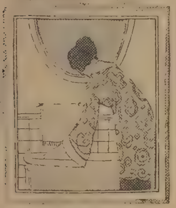

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Entered as second-class matter November 28, 1896, at the post-office at New York, under the Act of March 3, 1879
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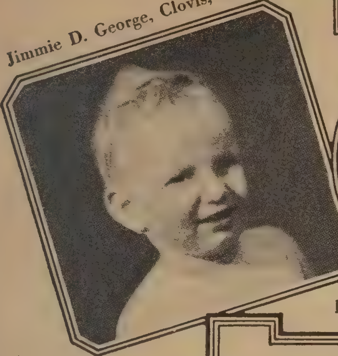

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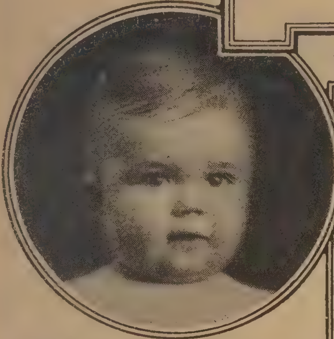

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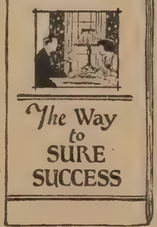

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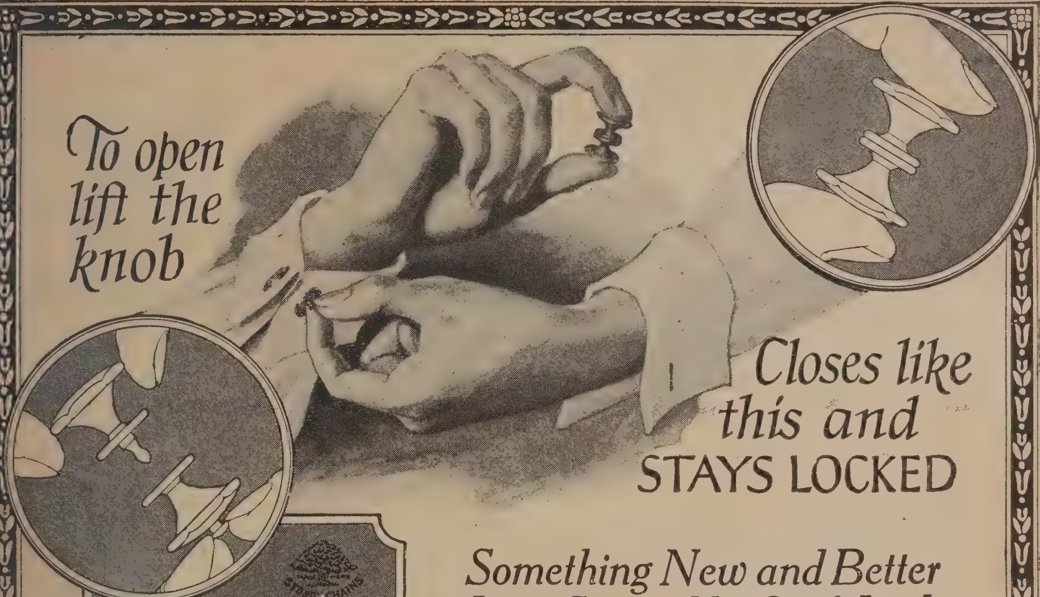

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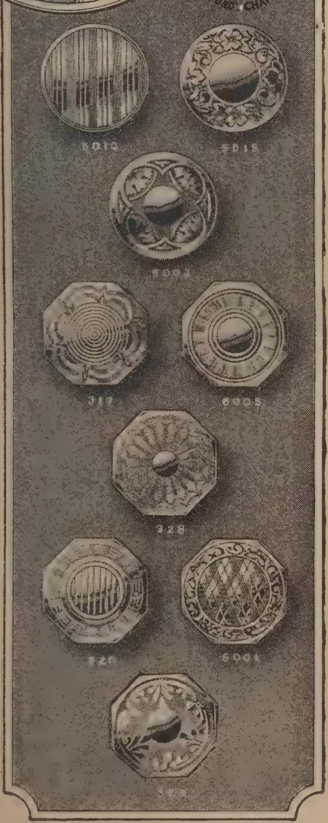

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MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE

NOVEMBER, 1923

Vol. LXXX NUMBER 2

The Last Man on Earth

A COMPLETE NOVELETTE—THE STORY OF THE THREATENED EXTINCTION OF HUMAN CIVILIZATION IN THE GENERATION THAT FOLLOWED THE END OF THE GREAT WAR

By John D. Swain

Author of "Billy Kane—White and Unmarried," etc.

IN the lounge of an austere club which has fronted Boston Common since the era of town criers and hoop skirts, a woman stood before a framed notice which read:

> Women shall be granted the privileges of this club only upon New Year's Eve, Bunker Hill Day, and such other occasions as may be designated by the House Committee.
>
> MINOT BULFINCH, Chairman.

The solitary occupant of the great Georgian room gazed upon these words with eyes which saw them not. Nor did she observe the long line of past presidents, whose life-sized portraits furnished an interesting study of American whiskerage, from the smooth jowls of the founder, as seen by Gilbert Stuart, down through the luxurious effects of the Forty-Niners and the neat burnsides of the Civil War, to the clipped mustache of the last incumbent, Colonel Bowdoin, a handsome bachelor of fifty-five when he was borne to the ancestral tomb on Copp's Hill.

The woman who stood unmoved in this citadel of Boston Brahmanism revealed her sex only in a certain delicacy of feature. Incredibly thin, her face and hands were dry and leathery, her hair bleached by exposure. She wore a loose tweed coat, a stained pith helmet, riding breeches, and serviceable boots, against which she idly tapped a heavy crop. A cigarette smoldered between her thin, straight lips, its blue smoke curling sacrilegiously about the framed ukase of the house committee.

Miss Edna Furlong, athlete and explorer, hunter of big game in Darkest Africa and conqueror of Mount Everest, had driven to the club immediately upon her arrival in Boston, half an hour before, and had not even followed her kit bags to the room assigned to her.

She had traveled three thousand miles by monoplane to meet Dr. Lulu Prodwell, the most noted pathologist of her generation; and it is not too much to state that their forthcoming interview was, everything considered, the most momentous conference ever held upon this earth.

Its gravity precluded the ironical thoughts which would, under normal conditions, have occurred to Miss Furlong as a guest of that club to which, as an almost sacred rite, she had as a young girl been taken one New Year's Eve, to be presented with two small biscuits and a sip of the famous punch invented by Paul Revere and served from a silver bowl of his own fashioning.

The explorer's musings were broken by the brisk entrance of Dr. Prodwell, followed by a plump, rather pretty woman in the late forties. The physician was clad much like Miss Furlong, save that instead of riding breeches and boots she wore knickers and thick golf hose; but her companion was entirely feminine, and even a trifle coquettish, in attire.

"Ah, here you are!" Dr. Prodwell advanced to wring the visitor's hand. "Good of you to fly so far! I brought Professor Tarbell with me. You must know of her—high gun in chemistry and physics—discovered the who-ray, which predetermines sex in unborn babes."

Miss Furlong bowed, her thin lips curving in a half smile.

"Which discovery, under prevailing conditions, is my idea of just nothing at all," she drawled.

"Right, oh!" agreed Dr. Prodwell. "But, you see, we've been counting on you to save the situation—and the world!"

She gestured toward a little table, and the three seated themselves. The physician lighted a cigarette, first offering her case to Professor Tarbell, who shook her head, her melancholy eyes fixed upon the portrait of Colonel Bowdoin.

"I wonder," she sighed, "how many women have uttered the blasphemous words: '*I wouldn't marry him if he were the last man on earth!*'"

Her companions, drier and less romantic in type, looked at her in surprise. Prodwell coughed.

"Considering the somewhat momentous reason which has brought us here—" she began.

"I don't care!" Professor Tarbell dabbed at her eyes with a scrap of cambric. "That portrait—I never saw it before. The last president, and—it may well be—*the last man on earth!*"

Furlong's eyes lifted in unspoken query. The professor blew her still pretty nose, and nodded.

"He had a marvelous constitution. It almost seemed that he was immune against masculitis. His death is the last recorded among males. Of course, there may have been survivors among savage tribes, or in inaccessible places of the globe, where no records were kept."

She rose and crossed the room to gaze up into the proud, handsome face with its fearless eyes and firm chin. After a long moment she turned to face the little table at which the others waited in silence.

"And it was to him—that prince among men—that I said those fatal words: '*I wouldn't marry you if you were the last man on earth!*' And now God has wreaked His terrible retribution on me, and on all women!"

"Why, why did you refuse him?" Dr. Prodwell asked.

Professor Tarbell covered her flushed face with anguished hands.

"Be-because I was a w-wicked woman, and put my scientific researches above anything so common as mere human love! Because I was on the verge of something big — the who-ray — and feared emotion would sidetrack it!"

She wept quietly, standing there beneath her silent accuser.

Dr. Prodwell turned impatiently to her guest.

"I say, Furlong, would you like a drink?"

The traveler nodded abstractedly.

"I could do with a high ball."

A bell summoned an elderly waitress, who fetched Scotch and a siphon.

At this time the Volstead Law stood, along with hundreds of other outworn statutes, unrepealed but ignored. With the passing of men had passed the need of prohibition. When that strange and baffling malady, attacking only men, first appeared, a couple of decades after the Great War, and, despite the frantic efforts of scientists, in a brief ten years swept every male above the age of fourteen into eternity, it was realized by women that the liquor question was thereby settled for all time.

Men, they tenderly mused, poor, weak creatures at best, had to be protected from their own ungovernable appetites; but women were different. The prohibition amendment remained in the Constitution, but it was as dead as the Mann Law.

Professor Tarbell, her tears dried, wandered back to the table and seated herself dejectedly. She knew that Miss Furlong, sent out by the Women's Relief Corps, had for two years braved heat, cold, exposure, hunger, thirst, and savage tribes in order to penetrate to the remote places of the earth, to see if there might be, somewhere, a nucleus of men to replenish the doomed race. As a scientist, she had eagerly embraced the opportunity to listen to the explorer's confidential report to Dr. Prodwell; but as a woman, her thoughts were of poor Eliot Bowdoin, her suitor, asleep these ten years past in haughty, frowzy old Copp's Hill, walled in by squalid tenements.

Furlong finished her drink—not downing it as men used to do, but sipping it relishingly—and in two words summed up the net result of two years of incredible hardship.

"Nothing doing!"

Prodwell's face paled.

"Literally that?" she pleaded. "I—we—had hardly expected much in the way of concrete result; but we had hoped that you might have found indications that would leave us at least a hope that in some as yet unexplored region—"

Furlong shook her head impatiently.

"Not a chance! The microbe you medicos have failed to check has swept our planet. I think I realized how much depended upon my investigations. I know I didn't spare myself. Courted death a hundred times. Covered Tibet and the Desert of Gobi. Staggered, delirious with fever, through the swamps of equatorial Africa. Froze both ears and a foot up among the Lapps. Cruised among little islands that aren't on any map. Crossed the Sahara twice. In my sober belief, *there isn't an adult man alive to-day!*" After a pause she added: "But what difference does it make, anyhow, since you haven't found a cure?"

Prodwell leaned forward, and whispered:

"Wrong! I have isolated the germ and discovered a vaccine that confers complete immunity!"

With fingers that trembled a little, she drew from a coat pocket a small morocco case, and from it produced two small vials and some glass slides.

"I succeeded on the very day your radiogram arrived," she continued; "after a laboratory battle as thrilling in its way as your own fight against climate and privation. You are the first to know of it, excepting Tarbell here, who has been assisting me. She is attacking the question from another angle—seeking the cause, and the reason for woman's immunity. All this will be cleared up in due time."

She held up the two vials, identical in appearance, filled with a colorless fluid.

"One of these is alive with virulent germs of masculitis. The other contains only inert organisms, destroyed by a tiny drop of my vaccine. Seen under a microscope, this slide reveals the bugs as very similar to the pneumococcus, save for a minute hook at one extremity."

Edna Furlong drew a deep breath.

"But that means," she said in awe-struck tones, "that you can inoculate all the remaining boys, and that you don't need any adults! It's only a question of time!"

Dr. Prodwell carefully replaced the tubes and slides in their little morocco case, and pocketed it. She lighted a fresh cigarette before replying.

"Theoretically, of course, it means just that. The medical profession will at once be supplied with vaccine; but it isn't so simple as you make it sound. How long will this immunity last? I don't know. Will there be unexpected aftereffects? No one can say. Granted that it is all that we hope and believe, how many boys are left? Not one under ten years of age, or over fourteen. Only the hardy few have reached the latter age. Of this nucleus of boys, in how many have the ravages of the baffling disease gone too far? And of the pitifully small residue, don't forget that an alarming proportion will succumb to other maladies, or drown, or get themselves run over by radiobiles, or fall out of trees, or monkey with a gun they thought wasn't loaded. Furlong, we'll be lucky if we rear three thousand, here in America, to marriageable age!"

Tarbell nodded.

"Six years from now, my who-ray will insure a preponderance of boy babies; but even if everything works out smoothly, civilization will have been set back at least five hundred years. Matrimony will be a state function—"

"*The* state function, I'd say," interrupted Furlong. "With bachelorhood a capital crime!"

"Upon you we rely to carry the vaccine to the heathen," they told Furlong, "to see that the brown and yellow and black races do not perish."

"And meanwhile?"

"The press will have the facts to-night. The tragic news that in no forgotten corner of the world have you been able to find living men will be mitigated by the fact that the disease has been conquered by medical science, and that a limited supply of husbands will be available in five or six years more."

Prodwell signed her bar check, and they rose and passed from the room, Tarbell casting a final languishing glance at the sternly beautiful features of the late Colonel Bowdoin.

"I don't wish to sound a pessimistic note," remarked Edna Furlong, as they parted at the club entrance; "but it's my guess that in about five or six years hell will break loose on this earth!"

II

A WORLD without men, without battleships, B.V.D.'s, or bigamy. A world of women, frantic at first, then stunned; and finally, when the last man on earth was borne to his rest, going on with its daily life because the habit of untold centuries was too strong to be overthrown in a single generation.

Going on—but to what purpose? At first, and for a long time, there was the hope that as medical science had conquered other great plagues of history, so it would conquer this worst plague of all while there yet remained a few adult males to carry on. As this hope dwindled, thoughtful minds accepted the awful facts, and admitted that before another half century had rolled by the earth would be inhabited by a handful of aged women.

Nature—caring no more for the breed of humans than it did for so many turnips, or lizards—would tranquilly behold the taking over of great cities and sleek suburbs by rodents and weeds and insects. Waterfowl would disport in municipal reservoirs; big game would prowl unmolested where their ancestors roamed in the time of J. Fenimore Cooper. Riotous vines would embrace the skyscrapers; rank grass would stand knee high in Fifth Avenue.

The thinkers, then, began planning great community houses, rat-proof and weatherproof, with vast storage rooms for food and fuel—houses with no stairs to climb, located in California and other healthful and equable climes. In these citadels, so they planned, poor, decrepit humanity should make its last stand.

Already a swift and deadly poison had been chosen for those who should find life intolerable when our race had shrunk to a few dodderers, unable to care for one another, or for themselves. In that day—the true end of the world—when there was no longer strength enough to reach out and place a fagot on the hearth, and tremulous fingers could not open the tins and boxes of preserved foodstuffs, there would be the little capsules ready to hand.

Meanwhile, at least partially, gloom lifted from the world. Time, the healer, did not fail utterly, even in this crisis. So long as a single male child lived, there remained the secret hope that he might somehow escape, and recreate a race.

Ten years had passed since Colonel Bowdoin, the last man of perhaps five hundred million adult males, had died. In every conceivable aspect, life had changed. Human relations in 1923 bore far more resemblance to those prevailing in the glacial age than to those of 1950. There were no babies, of course. Children of ten or eleven were so rare as to attract attention anywhere. The public appearance of a boy more than twelve years old was enough to create a mob.

And pampered little beasts they were, too. They were the kings of earth; nothing was too good for them. The poorest lad had at least one physician and two nurses in constant attendance. With anguish, their relatives reflected that in two or three years, at most, they would almost certainly perish; and they were humored and petted as the dying are. To affront one of them was to court lynching. It was regarded as a combination of blasphemy, high treason, and lese majesty.

All boys were wards of the state, and under rigid surveillance. Most of them were housed in luxurious institutions.

Religion had undergone as great a convulsion as any human organization. The great historical churches which depended upon a masculine priesthood had ceased to exist. Dust lay thick upon their altars. The same fate, of course, had overtaken the fraternal orders, some of them centuries old, others the creation of yesteryear. Their pompous temples were untenanted, and their ritualistic robes fed the complacent moth.

An army of frenzied female evangelists, fired by the fast approaching end, wandered up and down the land, barefoot and with disheveled hair, and preached repentance; but the great sober majority of their sisters regarded them as deranged. There were many churches with women pastors, who drew fair-sized congregations; but these steadily diminished in number. It was plain that a manless religion was doomed to atrophy.

Rentals were absurdly low. One could obtain a modern city mansion, with half a dozen bathrooms and every convenience, for the price of a kitchenette apartment back in 1920. Two spinsters bought an entire country club, with a fifty-room house equipped with swimming pool and bowling alleys, surrounded by an eighteen-hole links, paddocks, and an artificial lake, for less than three thousand dollars. A well known sculptress chose to live in a cathedral that had cost fifteen million. She paid no rental whatever, as nobody owned it, or wanted it.

No structural ironwork was attempted by the world of women, and there was little building of any sort. Splendid edifices in city and country stood vacant; repairs were kept up only on those in actual use. All the great ocean liners were tied up at their piers, and international relations practically ceased. A few yachts plied the seas, and cables and wireless bore meager news across the Atlantic.

Newspapers, as we used to know them, early gave up a losing fight. With no news of men, no threats of war, no abductions or elopements, no market reports or strikes, the daily press rapidly dwindled to a few weekly organs filled with stories of the Sunday supplement order. Women preferred to get their news from the broadcasting stations, which were as common as corner drug stores had once been; and they were devoted almost wholly to reporting social and sporting events — for women went in for athletics with an almost unbelievable fury.

The great universities continued their rivalry. Such classics as the Harvard-Yale football games were still played, but soccer had replaced the old American game. Boxing contests drew huge throngs. The feminine champions of the ring were as fast and clever as men, and some of them packed almost as mean a wallop. Golf, tennis, racing, hockey, lacrosse, were played as never before. Our country was developing that race of " fierce athletic girls " prophesied by the poet Whitman.

The feminine gambling instinct preferred bridge to the stock market. Every city had its municipal card house, with a uniform " kitty " established by law, and a limit based upon the sworn tax returns of the players.

Quite naturally, a profound change took place in amusements. Dancing ceased, save in its formally classic aspect. Literature maintained a high level, but fiction ceased to be written or read. With love, fighting, sex jealousy, double-living, bootlegging, bohemianism, villains, missing heirs, and faithless lovers and guardians removed, what was the poor novelist to do?

Similarly, the drama languished. At first, plays and pictures were produced with women in male rôles; but the memories evoked were too poignant. The stage was given over to vaudeville, juggling, jazz, and animal acts.

The various forms of censorship died a natural, if not a painless, death. It appeared that only men had needed censoring! Watch and ward societies, vice squads, keyhole and transom experts, were out of luck. Not that immorality entirely ceased, of course. There were certain curious books, veiled in symbolism, which voiced the tenets of obscure groups; but they were negligible. Curfew laws, homes for wayward girls, travelers' aid societies, uplift movements, chaperons, were as extinct as the pictures of beautiful youths advertising popular brands of collars.

There were, at first, a few barrooms; but they soon failed. It was proved that women—even the rare dipsomaniacs—were not partial to drinking on their feet, assisted by a brass rail. Moreover, they utterly lacked the treating instinct, which, in weaker mankind, had so largely supported bars. They argued noisily as to who should pay for the drinks, consuming more time than liquor.

To cater to the morbid or sentimental, great waxwork museums were established in the larger cities, wherein were displayed groups illustrating every activity of vanished men. Among the popular exhibits was one of an old-time saloon. Everything was complete—sawdust on the floor, huge brass cuspidors, innumerable rows of bottles and glasses, soiled towels hooked to the corners of the great rosewood bar, and photographs of undraped beauties and undefeated pugilists on the walls. A ferociously genial bartender leaned across to demand of a carefully modeled gathering of souses:

"What 'll it be, gents?"

Other groups showed men cracking safes, operating moonshine stills, dragging their wives about by the hair, asleep on park benches, engaged in whipping or lynching one another, initiating a candidate in a lodge room, or busy about other typical masculine pursuits.

In these days the gentle art of dining fell to a low level. For several decades housewifery had been dying out. All the great chefs and stewards were masculine. Now, with the incentive of reaching the male heart by way of his stomach no longer remaining, women found that preparing meals irked them more than ever. Great municipal kitchens were established, and delicatessen shops multiplied in the residential districts.

In apparel, the old question whether women dress to please men, or to make other women jealous, remained unsettled. A great proportion wore loose knickerbocker suits and common-sense shoes; but the demand for elaborate toilettes and smart hats was very great, and the sale of rouge, lotions, and hair dyes did not languish. Women still powdered their noses, revealed themselves generously on formal occasions, and paid exorbitant prices for rare perfumes.

So went the world, adapting itself to stupendous changes. Little girls still played with dolls, though the babes they symbolized could never be born to them. Boys in their games imitated the rough contests of the men they could never grow up to become.

Makers of cigars, valentines, and safety razors, jewelers, florists, and hundreds of others, found their trades unprofitable. There were no labor strikes, because there was no future proletariat to plan for. In no profession save the medical was any attempt made to do more than mark time. What was the use?

And yet the world—only a half world now—plodded on, laughing and crying, working and playing, and hoping against all reason, because hope is the very last thing to die within us.

To this world, by newspaper, radiophone, billboard poster, and public addresses, came the news that Edna Furlong's two-year search for missing men had been in vain, but that Dr. Lulu Prodwell's antitoxin was available, to be administered to the young lads who alone could prevent the total extinction of the race.

III

At a corner table in the Chicken Coop, a malodorous tea house on the western slope of Beacon Hill, three women sat in a conference as momentous in its way as the one in the old Beacon Street club.

Greenwich Gertie, leader of the notorious Tea House Gang of female crooks, had summoned Frisco Kate and Red Sal, two of her henchwomen, to share a secret of tremendous import.

The trio were alike in this—they all belonged to the twenty-minute egg class; but the hardness of Red Sal, a watery-eyed blonde, was mitigated by a sentimental streak that sometimes irritated her two companions. She also had a touch of catarrh; and since Greenwich Gertie was speaking in a whisper, her snuffling was more audible than usual.

The leader, without removing her cigarette, spat her information from one corner of cruel lips that barely moved. The others gave her the close attention which she always exacted, and which her ingenious schemes really deserved.

"Ya read about that old dame what's-her-name — Furlong — chasin' herself all over the woods to find any stray man that might 'a' been overlooked?"

"Yeah," Frisco Kate answered.

Red Sal sniffed that she, too, was thus far in touch with the news of the day.

Gertie, not lacking the dramatic instinct, paused to heighten the suspense, her beady black eyes flitting from Kate's big, stolid face to Sal's pimpled one.

"Listen! I got us sittin' pretty for the rest of our sweet lives. What that old dame couldn't find in two years, with all her expenses paid, I digs up all by myself. *I got a live man!*"

The effect was all she had hoped for. Frisco Kate's face, ordinarily as expressionless as a cabbage, for once flamed into incredulous amaze. Red Sal's watery eyes and weak mouth flew open together.

"Get out! Where is he?"

The bony fingers of Greenwich Gertie closed on Sal's soft forearm like the jaws of a woodchuck trap.

"Shut up!" she hissed. "D'ya want to start a riot?"

After a furtive survey of the room, to see if any of the dozen listless drabs who were lounging over the dirty tables had overheard Red Sal's incautious query, Gertie continued:

"Never mind where is he at. He's where I can put my hooks on him any old time."

"How old is he?" whispered Sal.

"I dunno. He's got so much hair and whiskers, it ain't easy to dope out. Not over thirty-five, I guess, and he's sound, kind, and not too big for us to handle."

"Chee! I thought the last one croaked when I was a kid!"

The bandit leader nodded.

"Sure! Everybody thought so; I wouldn't believe nothing but my own lamps, neither."

"What ya goin' to do?" breathed Kate.

"Do? What ya s'pose? Write a piece about it and send it to the paper? This is what *we're* goin' to do—because I can't pull it alone. I got to have help; so ye're in on it, and whatever we get is cut three ways. We're gonna sell that bird to the gov'ment for a million dollars!"

Red Sal's reply to this carefully worked-up climax of Gertie's story was amazing. A wistful look came into her watery eyes, and she snuffled loudly.

"Aw, don't let's sell him! Let's keep him!"

The leader glared at her in withering contempt.

"Snap out of it, you ash can! Pass up a million fish for one bow-legged, cross-eyed man? Not if—"

"Ya didn't say nothing about him being all that," complained Frisco Kate.

"No, nor I shan't say nothing about it when I'm offering him for sale! Anyhow, he's a man, even if he never could double for *Romeo*. But get me, kid—if either of ya act mushy over this bird, and try crossing me up, I'll rub ya out so they won't be so much as a snuffle left of ya!"

Red Sal shivered slightly.

"I ain't never crossed ya, Gert," she whispered. "I only suggested we keep him for a while. It's so long since I seen a john, I've forgot how one looks."

Gertie leaned back, mollified.

"Well, folks 'll forget how *you* look if ya try to slip me anything. Now listen!"

She swept the cigarette stubs to the floor, rested her wiry arms upon the greasy table top, and leaned closer to her pals.

"I was in that all-night lunch when Big Alice croaked the Feeney woman. Her mouthpiece slips me a nice bit of change to lose myself as a material witness—which is why Big Alice didn't take the high voltage. I sneaks up into New Hampshire, in the hills; and I'll tell the world that as a place to hide out in, it's fine country. I drops off a flat car just beyond Ashland, a thrivin' burg of eleven or thirteen old maids and a few thousand cats. From there I clumb a hill for four solid miles, and in all that time I never see nothin' more exciting than a flock of crows. On top of this hill was a lot of cellar holes and some busted barns, which same had once been a hick village called Bridgewater. I see it was a good place to lose myself in, but it begun to look a little *too* good. It was getting toward sundown, and I hadn't found any place to eat or sleep. Then I hear somebody chopping wood. It sounded so loud I thought 'twas close by; but it must 'a' been a mile farther on before I come to the house, a tumbledown place as big as a church. Ya could 'a' knocked me for a row of kosher laundries when I see that it was a man who was busy at the wood pile!"

Grunts of sympathetic interest came from Gertie's hearers.

"At first," she went on, "I couldn't believe my own eyes, and doped it out it must be a bearded lady or something like that; but from the way he stands, and the big chaw he takes from a hand of tobacco, I got to admit here's one he-male that didn't contract the pip. He swung a mean ax, too. Just then an old dame comes to the door and makes noises like the whooping cough. It seems she's a dummy, and cuckoo besides; and they talks in sign language for a while, with me sneaking behind a big tree, so they didn't see me. Pretty soon the man takes a basket, with bread and butter and eggs in it, and goes away; and because a real he-man is a novelty in my young life, I shadows him to see where does he hang out, and has he maybe got any brothers. Will ya believe me, he lives in a cave, and is a hermit, which I thought they never was any, only in story books! I waits till he goes in, and then I follows. Honest, I thought he was going to throw a fit or something; but finally I convinces him that I'm dodging the police, and that his secret is safe with me, and then he gives up the story of his life. He's been living in this way for thirteen years, and has the cave all dolled up like the kitten's vest. They's a spring close to the entrance, and a thick blanket for a door, and inside it's nice and dry, with a good bunk and a stove and plenty of tinned grub, a sack of spuds, and a ham hung up at the end of the tunnel."

Gertie paused. The other women silently waited for her to resume her absorbing narrative.

"It seems that this bird got stuck on some jane named Hattie, 'way back when the supply of men was more than equal to the demand, and she cans him for some better-looking guy. He gets an awful grouch on, and decides he's off of women for life; so he finds this cave, and here he's lived ever since, seeing nobody but the dippy old woman, who can't talk, and hasn't got nothing to say if she could. The poor fish don't even know he's worth his weight in platinum as the last man on earth, because he never sees any books or newspapers. He has it fixed with granny to split her wood and raise her spuds and cabbages and so forth, and he takes his pay in milk and bread and eggs and stuff. Well, I leave it ride that way, because already I got an idea of kidnapping this hairy prize when the right time comes, and I don't want him to get wise. As he's lived in this one cave going on thirteen years, I ain't leery he'll leave, because he's scared stiff at the sight of a woman, except only granny, who, as you might say, is more like an animal than a real woman. I note the place in my mind, so that I can't fail to find it when needed; and after letting him fix me a mess of fried eggs and a big bowl of bread and milk, I allow I'll be on my way—which tickles him so he won't take no pay for the feed. I go down the other side of the hill, and come to some houses on Newfound Lake, and there I board with some old dames till after Alice's trial is over. Now I'll spring the glad news to the Senate and the Cabinet and a few heiresses, and get 'em to bidding against each other. Of course, they'll first try to find this bird, but as I'm the only one that's turned him up in over thirteen years, we should worry! Then they'll make their offer—and that's when you two come in; for this bird is going to put up an awful holler. When a man hates women so he hides in a crack in the rocks all this time, he'll just love to be drug out and auctioned off to the highest bidder, or to a syndicate! Selling him is going to be a pipe, but delivering the goods is going to be a real woman's job. Your play is to keep mum, hang around where I can find you any time, and stay in training for a real scrap."

As Greenwich Gertie finished her narrative, Frisco Kate doubled a huge and freckled fist.

"Lemme get my hooks on a real live man, and he'll never get away till I say so! Not a chanst!"

Red Sal sighed.

"There couldn't be no harm in kissing him just once, before we turn him over?"

"Aw, ya make me sick! When ya get that kale, ya can kiss all the pretty boys that's growin' up. They got a new dope now that 'll keep 'em alive. Wait till ya see this hermit, and ya won't even want to shake hands with him, let alone kiss his hairy mug!"

The trio shut up like clams as a policewoman entered the Chicken Coop, sharply scanning its habituées. When she had left, they separated, to go to their lodgings and sleep and dream of pursuing a riotously bewhiskered Apollo over mountains and across lakes and up tall trees, and to awake just as they cornered him and were about to enfold him in a mighty embrace.

IV

ELMER ROBINSON possessed a rare lack of personal charm. Nature had unquestionably designed him for a father and husband, for he was of the faithful, unimaginative type which would have turned over all his wages to his wife, eaten whatever was set before him, and gone outdoors whenever he felt that he needed a smoke; but having said thus much of him, we have said it all.

In an era when snappy youths with glib tongues and belted and pleated coats were common enough, Elmer had contrived to get himself engaged to a pretty schoolteacher in a Vermont village, where he happened to be about the only eligible bachelor, and where he worked a lean farm inherited from his ancestors.

Then Hattie—the schoolma'am—spent a vacation in Brattleboro, waiting on a summer hotel table; and it was all over with Elmer. Odious comparisons got in their deadly work; and before her school reopened, she had become Mrs. Bliss, and was living up to her new name.

The tragic news came to Elmer as he was toiling in the hot sunshine, destroying potato bugs. He was what might be called a one-woman man. Romance died in him as surely as the Colorado beetles died beneath his Paris green. He cursed the sex, sold his farm, pocketed the two hundred dollars that it fetched over and above the first and second mortgages, and became an Ishmaelite, wandering in lonely places, avoiding his own kind as far as possible and the perfidious sex at all times.

In due time he fetched up on Bridgewater Hill, and, stumbling upon a large, dry, and airy cave, he became a hermit, just about the time when the ravages of masculitis began to denude the world of its men.

His subsequent contact with humanity consisted in a satisfactory arrangement he made with the sole inhabitant living within four miles—an old woman, deaf, dumb, and half-witted, whose cow, chickens, pigs, and simple culinary gifts gave him all he needed, in return for such chores as he did for her.

Never a student, Elmer Robinson was prejudiced against literature in any form, because the faithless Hattie had been an educator. Henceforth he willingly gave up the *Rural Economist*, the Holy Scriptures, and his annual " Farm Almanack " — his three sources of culture. He neither bathed, shaved, nor manicured himself. He worked every day until he was tired, he slept soundly, he ate heartily whenever hungry. He was troubled by no fears that the world was going to the bowwows, or that morals and manners were degenerating. He became an expert weather prophet, and knew the habits of beast and bird and fish, but practically ceased to think. His existence was much the same as that of a healthy cucumber on its vine.

Since nobody had any occasion to climb the four miles to the top of his hill, he was untroubled by visitors. The old woman now and then hitched up her steed and drove down to Ashland or Plymouth, to get supplies; but her mental and vocal impediments, coupled with a natural taciturnity, prevented her from mentioning the existence of her equally taciturn neighbor of the cave.

In one of nature's grandest outposts, with forty miles of the Presidential Range as an ever-changing panorama, and the blue mirror of Newfound Lake below him, the hermit didn't come within miles of a wandering masculitis germ. While his fellow men perished miserably and were mourned, he lived on, and was not molested. It is doubtful if the wits of the old woman were equal to a realization of the calamity which had desolated the globe. If so, she did not evince any concern.

The unsuspected appearance of a woman —young and not wholly without physical attraction—at the mouth of his cave gave Elmer a horrible turn. Unlike his great prototype, St. Anthony of Thebes, he was not tempted, save to flight; and there was nowhere to go! It was many years since he had seen a girl, and he had never seen many; yet even his inexperience recognized in Greenwich Gertie a hard and perdurable quality that turned his joints to water.

When, after his first panic and his recognition of the fact that he was cornered, she had made him understand that she was herself a fugitive from the law—which he could well believe—he had been only too glad to give her his own supper and speed her on her way.

It was now some weeks since he had watched her going down over the hill toward the lake settlement; and she had never come back; but her beady eyes still followed him in his dreams, and his nerves became jumpy by day. The flight of a rabbit through the brush, the sudden scream of a blue jay, would bedew his lush whiskers with trickles of cold sweat.

He thought of giving up his snug cave; but no other place seemed any safer. Besides, he was very comfortable here, and he had taken root like a tree. It was his home. He knew every shrub, every brook, every bowlder, every ground hog's hole, for a mile in every direction. So he stayed on, but with the feeling that hard-featured nymphs were spying upon him day and night.

One precaution he took. His cave had but one opening, protected by an old pair of horse blankets, and concealed by a clump of mountain laurel. The farther end terminated in a crevice of loose shale. On this latter he began to work feverishly, with a pick and a shovel borrowed from the old woman.

As he was vigorous and wiry, in a surprisingly short time he had made a rear exit big enough to crawl through. This came out behind a great cedar; and he cunningly strewed branches over it, so that the eye of a passer-by could not detect it. After that, he slept better.

"And then, one night," as the screen titles say, Elmer had retired to his husk mattress feeling unusually at peace. It had come on to rain at dusk; and he had unearthed from its warm nest a big pot of pork and beans which had simmered underground for a full twenty-four hours.

Full of beans and hot coffee, he sat for an hour, smoking the tobacco leaves that he raised and cured. He poured out a mug of hard cider, into which he thrust a red-hot poker from his little cannonball stove. It sizzled protest, an amber froth boiled up; and ten minutes later gentle snores filled the hermit's cavern.

V

A DISREPUTABLE taxicab, whose piloting up Bridgewater Hill in the rainy dark had been a species of miracle at which Red Sal was an adept, came to a pause just this side of the clearing where the old woman lived. From its unlighted interior stepped two alert figures.

"Wait here," commanded Greenwich Gertie. "Keep her engine turning. The old dumb-bell lives there, and we got to walk the ties from this place. Back her round," she directed Red Sal, "so's we can make a quick get-away."

Accompanied by big Kate, she skillfully led the way past the landmarks she had memorized, identifying here a blasted tree and there a bowlder heaved up in the glacial age, her pocket torch darting from side to side of what had once upon a time been a turnpike, lined with prosperous farms.

At a clump of junipers she left the trail and struck off through the thicket. Frisco Kate cursed heartily as her burly figure was clutched at by sharp thorns, and her big, flat feet found rolling stones.

"Wait!" whispered Gertie. "Don't ya hear somethin'?"

They did, indeed, make out a new noise that rose gently above the drumming of rain and the sough of wet branches.

"The bird's asleep, all right. All the better!"

Gertie cautioned her helper to stop swearing. From now on to the big rock that marked the last stage of their journey, their progress was as slow and stealthy as that of a pair of stoats.

A peep behind the blanketed opening revealed a pleasant scene of rustic tranquillity. The little stove still gave forth a genial warmth; the odor of properly baked beans blended with the aromatic challenge of hard cider. Lying flat on his back, barefooted, clad in patched corduroys and an ancient sweater, slept the last man on earth, his whiskers stirring rhythmically with every snore.

"Ain't it a sight for sore eyes?" breathed Frisco Kate. "I got to hand it to you, Gert. I don't mind sayin' that I thought it was only a pipe dream!"

It could hardly have been her almost inaudible whisper that roused Elmer Robinson from slumber so profound. Possibly he had, in his years of solitude, acquired a sort of feral instinct such as foxes and weasels possess. Perhaps a faint, feminine fragrance was wafted to his subconsciousness from the two dripping, motionless figures beside him.

Whatever it may have been, one second Elmer lay fathoms deep in the tides of sleep; the next, he was on his bare feet, his eyes wide open, every sense awake.

Greenwich Gertie knew nothing of the secret exit her prey had so zealously excavated since her first visit. As Elmer bounded wildly to the far end of the cave, five precious seconds were lost before her quick mind grasped the danger.

"Come on!" she bawled. "There goes a million dollars!"

The hermit, a skinny man, had made his arduous tunnel none too wide. He was out and away before Gertie wriggled half through. Frisco Kate stuck for a full half minute, cursing like Jezebel, before she won through and plunged after her leader's darting electric torch.

The mad flight of a hirsute *Paul* and two ravening *Virginias* through the black night of storm ended when the unfortunate hermit's bare feet, cruelly bruised by sharp stones, faltered. His pursuers, wearing stout shoes, dragged him down.

Undeterred by false gallantry, he fought like a hound at bay, with legs, claws, and even teeth; but Frisco Kate was a worthy successor to the stick-up men of yesteryear, and Greenwich Gertie was almost as good.

Fifteen minutes later Red Sal, patiently waiting, was guiding her taxicab down Bridgewater Hill. Within, Elmer Robinson lay bound and gagged. His two captors relaxed, and lighted cigarettes.

"Well, that's that!" commented Gertie, with Napoleonic brevity.

VI

It was a shrewd move on Greenwich Gertie's part to approach Dr. Lulu Prodwell, the celebrated physician, rather than to struggle with the red tape which hampered those who, without any pull, attempted to get in direct touch with any of the government officials.

The plump, genial lady who presided over the White House was largely a social figure. Her Cabinet was a galaxy of notable entertainers. There were no Secretaries of War and of the Navy, and no foreign relations to discuss. The Secretary of the Interior devoted herself to a series of brilliant state dinners. Only the Treasury and the postal service demanded serious thought.

Few new laws were introduced in Congress. Far too many had been inherited from a long series of masculine lawmakers. The judges of the Supreme Court were seldom called upon to pass on anything more vital than the fit of their gorgeous judicial robes.

Who—so Gertie argued—would be more interested to learn of the existence of the hermit of Bridgewater Hill than Dr. Prodwell, who had as yet no mature subject upon whom to try her vaccine? And as the most prominent member of the Federated Women's Relief Corps, with ample funds at command, Dr. Prodwell could instantly get done what Gertie would have to cajole or bribe supercilious officials and political lobbyists to do.

If the doctor could not be handled, there were plenty of millionaire spinsters who, once they began to bid against one another, might run the ransom up to such staggering figures that the modest million asked would look like chicken feed.

The sunny office was well filled with patients when Gertie breezed in. She recognized them as solid citizens, able to pay for the best advice. Easing herself upon a great Spanish leather divan beside a well known jurist, she lighted a cigarette and stared absently at the prominent notice on the opposite wall:

LADIES WILL NOT SMOKE IN THIS ROOM.
OTHER FEMALES MUST NOT!

She pictured the scene, were these pampered women who glared at her to know that she could, at any time she chose, produce a real live man in the prime of life. Why, they would kneel and kiss her soiled, down-at-heel Louis shoes! They would stand on their elaborate coiffures at her command. They would open the doors of their houses to her, and empty their safe deposit vaults.

Gertie's humor was of the rare sort which can enjoy a secret advantage, meanwhile enduring overt contempt. When the general hauteur became too pronounced, she met it with her own coarse weapons. She answered an insolent regard, through effective jeweled lorgnettes, by sticking out her tongue at a matron who had cornered the ostrich plume market, and who had once snubbed Lillian Pratt, the President of these United States. Where subtlety would have failed, Gertie's derisive red tongue and outthrust chin routed the impregnable dame.

Time passed so agreeably that, before she realized it, her turn had come, and the uniformed nurse admitted her to the consulting room.

Dr. Prodwell bestowed upon this, her last patient of the day, a piercing regard, not too affable. She recognized Gertie at once as of a different class from her usual clientele.

"Well, my good woman, what can I do for you?"

Greenwich Gertie shook her head languidly, and winked.

"Not a thing, doc—not one little thing. I'm all set!"

Dr. Prodwell frowned impatiently.

"My time is valuable—to others," she snapped. "If you are not here to see me professionally—"

Gertie interrupted her.

"I am, in a way; but I don't want advice. I've got somethin' *you* want—the worst way!"

"Look here!" Dr. Prodwell's straight back became even straighter. "I very much question if you have, or could have, anything that I would accept as a gift. If you are a peddler—"

Gertie's loud laugh cut the doctor short. Yes, in a way she was a peddler; but what a treasure it was she bore in her pack, so to speak! She lighted another cigarette, unmoved by Dr. Prodwell's glare.

"Keep yer brassière on, Lulu! I've got yer number—that's what I got. There's one thing in the world ya do want, and can't get—except from me. *I got a man!*"

"You—what rot is this? I—"

"I said it. I got the only real, live, healthy he-man in captivity! When I reads about the new dope ya mixed, with nobody but a lot o' kids to practice on, I decides to spring my little find here, instead of peddling it, as ya put it, at Washington, or on Fift' Avenoo!"

A certain calm assurance which shone through her visitor's disgusting crudity warned the physician, no mean student of human nature, that a little urbanity could do no harm. Of course, the creature might be demented. The world was so full of neurotic women these days—

"I see," she agreed soothingly. "Naturally, and greatly to your credit, you wish as a good American citizen to do your bit toward restoring normalcy."

Greenwich Gertie waved a bored hand—the one holding her cigarette.

"Ferget it! Do I look like I had got that way?"

Prodwell looked, and had to admit that Gertie didn't. She looked thoroughly capable of safeguarding her own material interests, under any circumstances.

"What I want," said Gertie, "is a million bucks—fish—iron men—payable on delivery."

Dr. Prodwell forced a laugh.

"You don't want much, do you?"

"What do *you* think? I got a man. He's all they is. There ain't any more. He's worth whatever money can be raised, ain't he?"

Prodwell did not find it easy to deny this. She temporized.

"Of course, nobody buys a pig in a poke—still less a *man*. He'd have to be examined by competent scientists."

"Sure! Go as far as ya like. He's one hundred per cent. But get this—if ya try to stall, and give him a phony rating to queer the sale, it 'll need a lot stronger medicine than yer new dope to keep ya in yer usual health!"

The doctor looked squarely into her visitor's cold orbs, and felt that Gertie spoke truth. She poised a pencil over a pad of prescription blanks.

"Tell me how I can communicate with you," she decided. "I shall have to consult with others about this. It's too big to handle alone, even if I kept a million dollars on hand."

Greenwich Gertie gave her name—or one of her names—and a telephone number. Then she rose.

"S'long!" she spoke at the door. "Don't call me up till ye're ready to do business. One man, one million—no discount fer cash!"

VII

During the ensuing twenty-four hours, Greenwich Gertie occupied a surprising portion of the valuable time of several important people.

Hurrying over to Pemberton Square, Dr. Prodwell was closeted with the district attorney, a personal friend of years.

"What do you know about her, Nellie?" she asked. "Anything?"

"Plenty!"

The D. A. pressed a button and summoned a clerk. In a short time the long and variegated record of Greenwich Gertie was spread before the two women on a great flat desk.

"You see, Lulu, she's bad all the way through. We know that she's the brains of one of the most troublesome criminal organizations in the East; but we've never been able to pin anything on her."

Prodwell nodded soberly.

"I see. Isn't there a so-called 'third degree,'—a sort of supermoral suasion—that has been successful in getting her sort to talk?"

There was, Nellie Gary readily agreed; but it had never got anything out of this woman except violent outbursts of the most shocking language.

"Of course, I could turn loose a whole regiment of plain clothes women, and try to locate this alleged man; but it would spread all through the underworld, and half a dozen gangs would set out to find him for themselves. In the general excitement he might be killed, or mutilated. It's her move. Make her produce him!"

"A million is a lot of money," objected Prodwell. "There's a fine chance of getting flimflammed."

The D. A. dissented.

"Not a chance, my dear! Put the ransom in escrow—that is, deposit it in a trust company, to be paid over only on the report of your examining board after they have seen the goods."

Satisfied that this was good advice, Dr. Prodwell proceeded to carry out a little idea of her own as to the raising of so large a sum.

She felt that notoriety was by all means to be avoided, until they were sure of their facts. Furthermore, she greatly desired to have a free hand in dealing with the hermit. Were she to approach Congress for an appropriation, or even to permit the Women's Relief Corps to finance the deal, there would be too many shapely fingers in the pie.

She therefore arranged for an interview with Dora Grant, the great producer and showwoman, who controlled, among other public amusements, the chain of waxwork museums which perpetuated vanished man's activities. To her she suggested that, as a public spectacle, a live man would be worth an initial investment of far more than a million dollars.

As Miss Grant was in every way a modern business woman, she needed no persuading. Without delay, her certified check for one million dollars was deposited, in escrow, and an hour later Dr. Prodwell telephoned to Greenwich Gertie.

On the following evening, a seedy-looking taxicab drew up before the iron gates of the select sanitarium that Dr. Prodwell maintained in Chestnut Hills; and from it a forlorn figure was carefully lifted and borne within.

Two days later Gertie received curt notice that the ransom awaited her; and at this point she and Frisco Kate and Red Sal fade out of our picture.

Each received an equal share of the money; but in one respect—important or not, according to one's viewpoint—Red Sal had the advantage. For, as the helpless hermit was lifted from the vehicle, she bent swiftly and, through a tangled thicket of dank whiskers, kissed him full upon his gagged mouth.

VIII

Bromides, and a merciful oblivion; and, as soon as possible after a balanced breakfast, his first vaccine treatment.

Elmer Robinson awoke from the terrifying experiences of the night before to a scientific kindness that was even harder to bear. He was shampooed, clipped, shaved, boiled, sterilized, and clad in spotless linen garments. A dental surgeon attended to his teeth. The best oculist obtainable fitted him to huge goggles. His blood pressure was taken, and, with stethoscope and little rubber-tipped hammer, specialists explored his surface inch by inch. His reflexes were duly noted, and the Wassermann test was applied.

For two days he belonged, body and soul, to Dr. Prodwell and her collaborators; then the epochal news was broadcasted to the world. An astonishingly virile bachelor of thirty-four, whose only defects were those incident to some thirteen years' abstention from dental and tonsorial parlors, had been snatched from the jaws of masculitis.

That the story would create a profound impression had been foreseen; but that it would result in what came perilously near to being chaos, nobody had guessed—although they might have!

Picture a feline universe, into which is introduced a lone canary; a world of hungry robins, and one solitary angleworm; or a kingdom of mice intrigued by the last remaining morsel of cheese!

Miss Grant, the enterprising producer, began at once to recoup herself for the heavy ransom she had paid. The hermit was posed before the camera, before and after renovations. The true story of his life was syndicated in the press. In it Robinson told of his early struggles, of his shy and yet affectionate nature, of his first meeting with Hattie, of her acceptance of his homage. The account was written by a competent journalist. As for Elmer, he never even read it.

Foreign and second serial rights, the publication of the completed memoirs in book form, illustrated, and later in a cheap reprint, totaled a tidy sum.

A great screen production—in which a slender, athletic girl doubled for Elmer—appeared. The scene of his abduction by the Tea House Gang was especially thrilling. The love episodes drew buckets of tears from audiences which had almost forgotten how to weep. A competent and eloquent legitimate cast and six road companies attended to the stage version of Elmer's life drama.

There were, of course, innumerable signed interviews in the magazines, on special topics—" How I Avoided Masculitis," " What I Think of the Women of To-day," "My Ideal Sweetheart," and the like; but the big money was taken in when Elmer appeared in person, selling little arts and crafts lockets containing a photograph of himself.

Before a week had elapsed, a daring attempt by female yeggs to kidnap him from Dr. Prodwell's sanitarium warned thoughtful women that a stronger guard must be maintained at all times. Only because the district attorney had reënforced the hospital staff with a number of detectives, was the yeggwomen's attempt abortive. As it was, three of them and an orderly were killed, and several severely wounded.

Elmer's life followed a rigid régime. He was attended night and day by a trained nurse and a bodyguard of two heavyweight pugilists armed to the teeth. A physician was ever within call. Everything he ate and drank was prepared by his own *chef*. He pleaded for baked beans, and ham and eggs, and cider, and received calories—things which he could not identify, and which never gave him the satisfying fullness that real grub imparted.

Worst of all to endure—worse than the daily tub, the rationing, the constant proximity of women, the cold feel of fresh linen—was his enforced exercise.

A celebrated physical instructor met him every morning, at precisely ten o'clock. She forced him to run so many times around the room, finishing with a sprint. She hurled a big medicine ball at him with such force that when his clumsy fingers missed it, he was usually bowled over. Imitating her, he bent over so many dozen times and touched his knuckles to the floor; squatted on his thighs, with his arms horizontal; inflated his lungs, while she counted ten slowly, and then exhaled with a sharp gasp; boxed for three mortifying rounds; was massaged, which tickled him agonizingly, and then sent to the cold shower.

This ordeal ended suddenly one morning when Elmer, wrought up past endurance, grappled with his instructress and bore her to the mat. Awkward enough he was, but strong as a chimpanzee. After all, he was a man, with a man's thews.

Wild screams brought a dozen attendants, who beheld him sitting on his trainer's chest and belaboring her with both fists. By no stretch of the fancy could the hermit be termed gallant, and the ethics of amateur sport meant less than nothing to him.

Thereafter his exercise consisted of long walks in the open, and a system of deep breathing, which he agreed to practice as long as he was spared the unwelcome attentions of a personal trainer.

IX

MEANWHILE, unknown to Elmer Robinson, great disorders prevailed throughout the United States. With the disappearance of man, the world of women had sunk into a sort of lethargy. The discovery of one live specimen awoke all those jealousies which lay dormant. Of the fifty million women in the country, forty-nine millions and some hundreds of thousands had very definite ideas about Elmer and what should be done with him.

The Senate and House woke up, and introduced bills of every description relative to his disposal. In Boston it was argued that he was a public utility, and should be under control of the commission. The General Court voted that he must not be taken outside the Commonwealth. The Governor promptly affixed her name, and instantly an appeal was taken to the Federal courts.

There were other and even more ominous signs of unrest. After several Black Hand letters had been received, an investigation showed that the anarchistic group was bent on destroying civilization at one blow, by killing Elmer Robinson. Never before had the enemies of humanity had so glittering a chance!

A vast body of orthodox Christian women followed the banner of Pastor Fanny Hicks, who prophesied a fiery retribution if the law of monogamy were violated.

"One husband, one wife!" was her slogan, regardless of the desperate plight of the world.

Bishopess Pease, in a scholarly polemic, showed that the Old Testament distinctly tolerated polygamy, and that in no place does the New Testament expressly forbid it. Pastor Hicks retorted by quoting from the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians:

> Let every one of you—love his wife—and the wife see that she reverence her husband.

These warring cliques, religious, economic, political, criminal, almost brought the business of living to a standstill. Families were divided—mothers against daughters, children against grandmothers. The disorders known as the Walnut Fudge

Riots followed a spurious report that the dieticians in charge of Elmer Robinson had refused his pathetic pleas for half a pound of candy.

Finally a group of parlor socialists secured an injunction forbidding any person or persons from exhibiting Robinson in public, for a fee. It was argued that, aside from his own sufferings, many casualties occurred in the mobs which gathered about him. It was claimed that capitalists were exploiting what was in reality a public asset, like air, or rain, or sunshine.

On the last night before the injunction became operative, the unfortunate man was on view at Mechanics' Hall, where a charity bazaar was being held.

More and more he had grown to feel that some awful fate awaited him; that he was the fatted calf destined for a horde of female prodigals. Thus have unhappy captives of South Sea tribes felt during the fattening process that leads to the village stewpot.

For his personal security, he was always exhibited upon a high platform and in a large container of plate glass. Plain clothes women were scattered freely through the audience.

Upon this night no unusual disorder had taken place. The women present were largely of the better class, and there had been no public sale of tickets.

It was verging on eleven o'clock when, for the first time, the captive roused from the dejected attitude he always had maintained. His act was totally unexpected. Uttering a dreadful howl, he hurled himself against the transparent front of his cage, and, amid a great crash of shattered glass, landed upon about eight hundred dollars' worth of millinery.

The resultant panic was notable even in an era of unrest. Scores of women fainted; many others were clubbed by the frantic guards, who did not know what it was all about, but were there to keep the last man on earth from bodily harm.

When at length they got to him, he was clasped in the arms of a skinny and rather shabbily clad woman, who was moaning, over and over, the one word:

"*Elmer!*"

To which he fervently responded:

"Hattie—*my own Hattie!*"

Dr. Prodwell shouted to the guards to stop trying to pry the reunited lovers apart; and they were still locked in a deathlike grapple when they were bundled into a limousine outside the hall.

X

A MARKED change came over the last man on earth. With the discovery, out in the audience, of his lost Hattie — whose husband, of course, had gone the way of all male flesh—his eyes gained luster, his shoulders squared.

Under no circumstances, he told the world, would he consider any mate but Hattie. The authorities might pass laws, issue injunctions, send him to prison—aye, or to the chair! Let them select for him a whole army of wives, the most beautiful, virtuous, fascinating, roguish, shapely, adoring, healthy young girls that ransacked nations could produce. He reminded them of a saying current in his youth—that you could lead a horse to water, but, after that, it was up to the horse!

In the end, they had to yield. There was this to be said about it—since the plan was wholly Elmer's, none of the many antagonistic groups of women could claim victory, or crow over the others.

Pastor Fanny Hicks married Elmer and Hattie Robinson. There were three thousand flower girls, but no best man; nor was a honeymoon trip practicable. Every effort was made to induce the happy pair to accept a home suited to their importance; but they showed their sturdy common sense by deciding to establish themselves a modest summer hotel up in New Hampshire, whose two hundred rooms barely sufficed for the army of nurses, physicians, secretaries, secret service women, journalists, and servants.

It was in May that Elmer and Hattie were married; and upon a certain raw February night a mighty throng was gathered in the deep snow that surrounded the Robinson home.

For long hours they had stood, reckless of frozen toes or ears. The converted hotel glowed at every window like a power plant. Eloquent shadows passed and repassed the drawn shades of the upper story. Then, suddenly, upon an upper porch appeared the dapper figure of Dr. Lulu Prodwell, one hand raised for silence.

And such silence as fell! In it, the snap of a twig, or the sighing of an ancient pine in its winter sleep, was earsplitting to that dumb mass of watchers.

Then, as the ringing tones of Dr. Prodwell shook the very stars in their courses with the momentous news, a shout went up from the assembled throng that vibrated the ancient bones in country churchyards for miles around.

Twins—*and boys at that!* Romulus and Remus Robinson, destined to rebuild a greater Rome, and to appear on postage stamps and gold coins and treasury notes, and as trade-marks on a thousand as yet uninvented commodities!

So the old world, so very near its final suspiration, turned restlessly in its sleep, and opened tired eyes in which fever no longer burned. Not yet was the human race to follow the giant lizard, the dodo, the lumbering mastodon!

The gifts that poured in from the far corners of earth comprised such things as an offer of the throne to either twin, from a score of nations; a solid gold cradle from India; a remission of all taxes, Federal and State, to the house of Robinson forever.

Amid all the weeping, and laughing, and thanksgiving, there was no happier or more incongruous figure than that of an aged crone, outlandishly arrayed in priceless black satin, who, being deaf and dumb and withal half-witted, tottered about showing her toothless gums, and uttering noises much like the whooping cough!

THE END

LOVE'S PROUD FAREWELL

I AM too proud of loving thee, too proud
  Of the sweet months and years that now have end,
    To feign a heart indifferent to this loss;
Too thankful happy that the gods allowed
    Our orbits cross,
  Beloved and lovely friend!
  And though I wend
Lonely henceforth along a road grown gray,
I shall not be all lonely on the way,
Companioned with the attar of thy rose,
Though in my garden it no longer blows.

Thou canst not give elsewhere thy gifts to me,
  Or only seem to give;
  Yea, not so fugitive
The glory that hath hallowed me and thee.
Not thou or I alone that marvel wrought
Immortal in the paradise of thought;
  Nor ours to destroy,
Born of our hearts together, where bright streams
  Ran through the woods for joy,
The heaven of our dreams.

  There shall it shine
    Under green boughs
So long as May and June bring leaves and flowers,
Couches of moss and fern and woven bowers,
  Still thine and mine,
    A golden house.
Perchance, before the winter that takes all,
  I, there alone in the deep listening wood,
Shall hear thy lost footfall,
  And, scarce believing the beatitude,
Shall know thee there,
  Wild heart to wild heart pressed,
And wrap me in the splendor of thine hair,
  And laugh within thy breast!

Richard Leigh

The House of the Wicked

A STORY OF ADVENTURE AND INTRIGUE IN THE FAR EAST

By Eleanor Gates and Frederick Moore

"LISTEN to me, Mr. Weatherbee!" warned the mate, in his harsh drawl. "Don't you make the mistake o' giving me *one single word* o' back slack!"

By the light of the swinging lamp above the main cabin table, Noakes looked less like a man than like some cruel caricature. He was lanky and angular, and as loose-jointed as a jumping jack. He wore a faded gingham shirt and shabby dungaree trousers that hung damply upon him. His bare feet were thrust into a pair of heelless native slippers.

What particularly added to his strange and distorted appearance was the way he wore his overlong hair. In color it was a mixture of uncertain drab and blondish tints; but this was true only of its outer length. Next to the scalp there was, for an inch or two, a much darker growth, as if for some reason the chief mate had been either bleaching or dyeing his locks, and they were gradually resuming their former shade.

Now, as he slouched on one leg, his gaze boring into the face of the second mate, that hair of his, wet from the mist out of which he had just come, hung down over his forehead and his half closed amber eyes, about his thin neck, and against his unshaven jaws, in straight wisps that resembled strands of damp, silky string.

The hairy mop gave his whole visage an expression of fierceness. To that expression his mouth added, for between lips that were parted in a sneer a missing tooth left a black gap.

The man he addressed was younger and more sturdily built, and held himself smartly erect. As he wore no coat over his sleeveless cotton singlet, it was possible to note the depth of his full chest and the muscular development of his bare arms.

However, in spite of his youthfulness and strength, his clean-shaven face was noticeably wan and drawn, like the face of a man who has been deprived of sleep for a considerable time, or who is suffering from some kind of strain. At the slow-spoken, ill-natured cautioning of the other, he colored slightly, and his blue eyes narrowed.

"I haven't intended to give you any back slack, sir," he declared respectfully, yet with no note of cringing in his voice. "When you asked me what I was doing here by the table, I told you the truth. It *is* too hot in my bunk. I hope you haven't any objection to my being comfortable on my watch below!"

Noakes swung up his weight to stand upon both feet, while those yellowish eyes studied Weatherbee for a long minute. Then the stubble-covered lips parted farther, and spread themselves in a smile that denoted wisdom as well as scorn.

"Don't try to make a fool out o' me," he observed knowingly. "I'm too smart to let anybody pull the wool over my eyes!"

After giving a backward toss to his unkempt head that sent the wet hair wisps whipping to either side of a singularly long and pointed nose, he added:

"It's the mid watch. I got the deck now, and if you come on watch with your two peepers thick-swelled from mooching 'round where you ain't wanted, when you ought to be pounding your ear, I'll tell you what I'll do—I'll shut both on 'em, that's what I'll do, and I'll shut 'em good and plenty!"

Weatherbee reddened with anger, but he gave a nod as if in assent.

"I'll turn in, sir," he promised.

Noakes fumbled for a match, picked up a long leg, scratched a light on the sole of a slipper, and set the flame against the end

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of a Chinese cigarette. Then, without speaking or glancing at the younger man, he turned languidly about, shuffled into the narrow passage that led aft, entered the tiny cubby-hole of a galley, which reeked of boiling coffee, and began to rattle among some crockery.

Left behind, Weatherbee ran a hand over his well-brushed, close-cropped brown hair.

"I could take you by the tangle on top of your pate," he remarked, "and drop you overside as easy as I could drop a rat! For one brass cash with a square hole in it, I'd do it; but I won't, either, because the other thing will give me a whole lot less trouble, and keep my hands clean."

Whereupon he showed his teeth in a grin.

Out of the door of the captain's cabin were coming loud and regular snores. Weatherbee gave one glance in that direction, waved a hand in a gesture of farewell, turned up the light above the cabin table, and strode to the after bulkhead alongside the companionway. Here he picked up a bundle which, wrapped in a blanket, had been pushed into a corner, and climbed the steps for the quarter-deck.

When he came out into the tropical night, he found the schooner still wrapped in a fog that blotted out the great, full moon, and the stars which hung so low and large over the Lillebonne. Halting for a second, he could not even see three feet before him in the direction of the stern, nor an arm's length over the top of the cabin trunk. It was as if he had pushed his way into a thick, black steam; as if the darkness encompassing the vessel was a light but opaque liquid that was overflowing the world.

"Just the right conditions," he decided, "for what I want to do! Far as light's concerned, we might as well be a mile under water!"

His eyes were of no use to him, but, like a determined blind man, he moved aft, the bundle under one arm. As he gained the taffrail, and leaned over to look down, he was not able to make out even the outlines of the dinghy floating astern. However, by a pull on the light painter, he drew the boat under the counter of the schooner. Then, judging his aim, he lifted the bundle overside and let it fall.

Next, quickly, but without any feeling except that of a pleasurable excitement, he put a leg over the rail of the scarcely swaying vessel and swung himself down. Finding the gunwale of the dinghy with the toe of a shoe, once more he drew the boat close to the anchored Lillebonne, and then let himself drop.

With a gentle splash and a rocking, the dinghy gave under him. From the belt of his trousers he took his sheath knife, cut the painter, took up an oar, placed the end of it against the schooner, and slowly, noiselessly, shoved himself away for a few feet. Then he lay still. Close as he now was to the Lillebonne, so densely did that black mist press about him that he could not tell where the blackness ended and the vessel began.

He turned to peer shoreward. Along this stretch of the Borneo coast there was no light for the guidance of ships. His eyes could not make out the loom of the land, but he knew its bearings, and cautiously he began to paddle.

When he believed himself some rods away from the schooner, he found the second oar. Then, taking care to prevent undue noise in the tholepins, he turned the dinghy about, and, his back to the invisible coast, rowed with his full strength.

Presently he made out a blurred speck—the single port of the schooner, lighted by the cabin lamp, which he had taken pains to turn high. A little way from him, that beacon touched the ocean, showing a dim, slow-heaving, oily spot.

It was perhaps ten minutes later when there was borne to his ears the one bell stroke which marked the end of the first half hour of the mid watch. Ceasing to row, he glanced at the luminous dial of his watch, and saw that it agreed with the schooner's time. Then he once more laid to his oars, carefully keeping in sight the dimming porthole of the Lillebonne. No longer did he have to use caution, for now he could not hear the fretting of the schooner's blocks, nor the grinding of her booms as they flopped to her gentle movement on an almost breezeless sea.

He rowed steadily for an hour, rested, smoked a cigarette, and then rowed for another hour. By now the Lillebonne's port was blotted out. At regular intervals he had heard her bells, telling off the half hours of the night, and giving him her bearings; yet, in spite of his steady work and the passage of time, he had not come near to land. Again he stopped rowing, puzzled, and a trifle worried.

"Have I missed my direction, or is something throwing me back?" he muttered. "It 'll be hard luck if I'm caught out here with the mists cleared after sunrise!"

He noticed a soft, purring ripple at the stem of the dinghy. As the way fell off the boat, this rippling sound did not lessen so swiftly as it should. This gave him a hint of the truth. Unshipping one oar, and holding the other partly in and partly out of the water, he was able to note, by the pull of the oar against the palm of his hand, that the dinghy was slowly, slowly turning.

"Current!" he exclaimed. "How's that? And it seems to set straight from the land!"

He pondered for a moment; then, as before, he fell to rowing, setting his prow into the current that was drifting him back.

At the end of a third hour, there was a perceptible graying of the steaming fog that shrouded him. Then, looking overside, he saw that the water about his boat was not the clear blue-gray of sea water, but a dark yellow-brown, as if it was heavy with sediment.

He carried a few drops of it to his lips. It was fresh. His hopes were confirmed.

"This is luck!" he declared joyfully. "As sure as I'm alive, I'm either in the outflow of a river, or I've been rowing up the river without knowing it—which accounts for the long time it's taken me to make the land!"

Soon he had further proof of his position. To his nostrils came the smell of tidal mud, testifying that swamps were close at hand.

"And swamps mean mangroves," he argued. "They'll give me plenty of places to hide. I'll put in before the sun gets up and wipes away this fog blanket."

Abruptly heading his boat at right angles, so that he was turned directly across the dun-colored current, he began to row with a sort of careless fury. In half an hour, at his back, as he glanced over his shoulder, there stood up, in the rapidly lightening murk, a stratum that was dark and vague. It was the front line of water-studding trees.

These at once broke into details of descending shoots, fuzzy pinnacles, and grids of gracefully looped creepers. Now he faced about on the thwarts, so that he might search out a place where he could enter the watery jungle and have adequate cover from observation.

Here, on the edge of the vegetation, the current was fairly sluggish. When he was once more headed upstream, he did not find the rowing hard work.

While he examined the tangle walling that side of the river, the haze swiftly brightened. Presently, glancing up, Weatherbee caught a glimpse of a clearing sky. From far back in the interwoven greenery there came the first cheery bird call.

It was not long afterward that he discovered, in the dense growth, a fairly wide and high-arched break. Just as, to his right, the rising sun broke through the cloud wrack, he turned the dinghy once more, and drove it toward the opening. He unshipped his oars, and, with the water of the swamp boiling muddily under his prow, entered a vivid green covert.

Here the oars could no longer serve him. To make sure that he was well hidden, he took hold of the vines and shoots and pulled himself deeper into the forest. In his retreat, there was still something of a current; but the boat was held against the mangroves, and could not drift.

The air was uncomfortably close. The gases of rotting vegetation assailed his nostrils. Disregarding both the heat and the rank odors, he pulled a canvas cap out of his pocket, put it on, found a cigarette, lighted it, and began to smoke.

He had finished a second cigarette, and was feeling sufficiently rested to be thinking of taking from his bundle a bite of something to eat, when suddenly, from straight before him, and close at hand, there sounded the clear, musical strokes of a gong.

His eyes staring, his breath suspended, he counted six. When they ended, still doubting his ears, he drew out his watch with a trembling hand, and found that his timepiece registered six o'clock.

"The Lillebonne?" he asked himself.

He knew that this could not be so. With the lifting of the fog, if the schooner could catch a breeze, it was probable that she would be far away. Besides, at six o'clock, her bell would be struck but four times.

As he put the watch away, he gave a nervous laugh.

"I'm getting jumpy," he concluded. "That Noakes has got on my nerves until I'm imagining things. My senses are playing me a trick!"

Yet he felt certain that he had really heard a gong of some kind.

"Perhaps, though, in the way that sailors, at sea, hear the bells of their home churches," he thought. "Am I getting some kind of a warning? Ought I to go back to the schooner?"

Feeling the uncanniness of the experience, in spite of the close air of his hiding place, he shivered.

"But I'll be hanged if I turn back!" he declared. "Maybe there's a settlement close by—in behind the mangroves."

Seizing now one tendril and now another, again he began to advance along the break. Presently, when he had gone a distance of thirty or forty feet, all at once the end of that leafy passage was reached, and his bow grated on what at first seemed to be a rock, dull red in color, up which vines climbed and clung.

"The bank?" he asked himself.

He stood up, his head among the creepers. As he peered through them, he saw that the reddish surface, where it was not smeared with the mud of the river, was wrinkled and blistered.

All at once his body froze into immobility, and he stared like a man in a dream.

"Why—why, it's a *wall!*" he exclaimed under his breath. "It's a wall that's been *painted!*"

His hand pressed to his forehead, he lifted his look higher, and saw—was it the edge of a rusty iron plate? And, placed at regular distances one from another, and in straight lines, were those the heads of rivets?

His eyes traveled higher still — twenty feet higher. Then he made out, in the better light that was above, what was unmistakably a railing.

"A railing!" he muttered under his breath, wondering and puzzled. "A railing along a wall of riveted iron plates!"

But the next moment he understood just what it was that had blocked his way. Under his cap the scalp crinkled on his head. He backed a step, and sat down.

"Great guns!" he gasped.

Before him, hemmed in by the jungle, embraced and enshrouded by it, clasped in its hold as by the tentacles of a huge green octopus, was the hulk of a good-sized iron steamer!

II

A SHIP!

For a while Weatherbee was too much amazed and awed by this utterly unexpected discovery to do anything but sit still and stare upward. Then he came to feel another emotion—gratitude.

"Here's my hut in the wilds!" he thought. "Here's a shelter—a place to stay as long as I like. I don't need to hunt a settlement, and risk running into troublesome natives. Of all the lucky things that have ever happened to me in my life! Well, I won't run away from you, old lady!"

Next, the question of food occurred to him.

"Wonder if there are stores in her!" he mused. "Canned goods, or rice that the rats haven't got into, or biscuits!"

Then he wondered how the derelict steamer came to be where she was.

"Ever since the year 1, to judge by the network that's grown over her," he mused. "Did she go aground by coming down the river out of control? Or was she deliberately backed in here, and reported lost, in order that her owner could collect her insurance? In that case, she'll be empty of everything except rats; but she'll be worth something, just the same."

He made a mental calculation as to the value of the hull and whatever machinery he would be likely to find.

"It wouldn't be a hard job to haul her out of here," he decided. "Say, I believe I've blundered into a rich piece of salvage!"

As he continued to peer upward through the vines and leaves, he made out a rusty wire cable which ran over the starboard bow and on, slopingly, to disappear from sight in the heavy growth. Evidently it was fastened to some tree out in the mud; but it was just as evident that it did not keep the vessel in place, for there was no strain upon it, as was proven by its slack loop.

"That settles it!" he asserted. "This old hooker was run in here and tied up. That means bad business of some kind. A steamer of this size isn't driven into a swamp and left for good just for the joke of the thing. The whole proposition spells skullduggery!"

He had been taking it for granted that the big hulk was abandoned; but now, of a sudden, he remembered those six strokes of a gong.

"They must have sounded from here," he concluded. "It was a clock striking that I heard. That means there's somebody aboard her!"

His first instinct was to call out, and to see whether or not his hail would be answered from the knightheads above him; but he restrained the impulse, and determined to stay quietly where he was for a while, to think his extraordinary find over, and to listen and keep watch.

"I'd better be careful," he decided. "Maybe she was waylaid out here by Borneo pirates, who murdered all hands. If that was the case, I'd better lie low. It's a good thing for me that no monkey's spied me yet. He'd give the alarm. If I hear natives, I'll wait until it's dark again, and get away."

For half an hour he sat without stirring, on the alert for any sound. He could hear the steady wash of the river current through the roots and the pendent branches; but there were no other sounds except an occasional bird note, or a floundering and thrashing which indicated that a crocodile was entering or leaving some distant glade.

At the end of the half hour he was impatient, and inclined to minimize the matter of danger.

"If pirates had possession of this hulk," he reasoned, "they wouldn't be keeping a modern clock going, or tapping on silvery gongs. Anyhow, it's more than likely that the gong was my imagination—if it wasn't struck on the Lillebonne and seemed close to me because the mist was so thick, and the sound carried. What's the use of my spending the day in this boat? I'm dead sure I don't want to spend the night here. If I'm going to shin up and take a look through my prize, I'd jolly well better do it in daylight!"

By now the sun was strong overhead, and a bright light penetrated the luxuriant foliage of the jungle, laying upon man, boat, and muddy water a delicate tracery of brilliant spatterwork.

"If I'm not mistaken," he thought, "her upper works are clear of vines, and her decks are open to the sky."

He began to plan how he would go up and overside. He saw the curve of the anchor chain, where it led upward from the starboard hawse pipe.

"That means that the anchor's on deck," he told himself.

He was not under the lowest part of the vessel's freeboard, and he found that he could not get the dinghy any farther aft along the hull amidships.

"I'll have to make it over the bows," he decided.

On examining the vines that covered the ship's side like a net, and others which hung down from the rail, he made up his mind that he could not trust his weight to any of them.

"I've got to have something strong," he said. "A slip might mean danger from crocodiles. Oh, for a heaving line to throw through the bight of that anchor chain!"

Patiently he set about the job of making a line. He selected a lawyer vine which trailed itself in and out among others that were reaching up toward the sun. It was an inch in thickness, tough, but pliable. By dint of careful work, he succeeded in locating twenty feet of the creeper. At either end he cut through it with his sheath knife. Then he trimmed it of its leaves and thorny hooks, taking heed to avoid scratching his hands, and to make no noise.

The length of vine ready, he hunted and got ready a second; after which he spliced the pair. Now, with one end of his forty feet of vine, he began to fish for an opening in a coupling of the anchor chain; but he found the rattan so elastic that, try as he would, it was impossible to lift it high enough to pass the end through the bight of the chain, or through a link.

In the flotsam beside the dinghy, and afloat in the thick water, he discovered a straight pole, water-logged and heavy, but capable of being put to his use. He weighted an end of the vine with a precious tin box of biscuits, taken from his bundle, hooked the weight over the end of the pole, and succeeded in pushing the box and the vine through the elongated iron circle. When the weight brought the end of the vine back to him, he grasped it, and was ready for his climb up the double vine to the hawse hole.

By this time, to judge from the steaming heat, the hour was well along toward noon; but he did not consider his discomfort, or think of staying down where there was shade.

"Now for a look at those decks up yonder!" he told himself, and felt his heart pound with pleasurable excitement.

He wasted no more time in listening.

"If the old tub had anybody aboard her," he argued, "I'd have heard some signs of life out of her long before this."

Taking off his shoes, swinging them to his belt by their strings, and making sure that his knife and a small automatic pistol were where he could reach them handily, he lay back on his two-ply line until it was taut, thrust his sock-covered toes into the vines growing against the vessel, and, working his head up through the green drapery that trailed down from the railing, went hand over hand until he hung from the rusty anchor chain.

There he got first one foot, and then another, into a link. Now he had something solid upon which to stand. He lifted himself higher with caution. Presently his eyes were level with the upper rim of the knighthead. Here the vines were thick. Over them he peered out upon the steamer's foredeck.

What he saw gave him satisfaction. Everywhere there was a thick litter of dead leaves, bits of vine, and fallen blossoms; while flowering tendrils from out of the jungle crossed the railing at many points along both sides of the steamer, so that they met at the winch wheel, and at the base of the foremast.

"Not a soul aboard!" he chuckled. "Why, it's been months, at least, since any living human foot has walked these rusty deck plates!" Then, sobering: "But it's like coming upon the skeleton of a man," he added, with a shake of the head—"the skeleton of a murdered man."

Looking aft, he could see the dirty gray of the vessel's superstructure, a rotten bridge apron hanging in tatters from the bridge rail, a pair of rusty iron doors which closed the passages on each side, and rusty ladders leading up to the saloon deck. Beyond were the blackened top of a single funnel and the stems of a pair of boats, which were suspended from their davits at either end of the bridge deck.

The steamer proved to be not wholly open to the sky. Over all her upper works straggled vines. Looking aloft, Weatherbee noted how those vines had grown until, at two or three places, they formed canopies through the lacings of which the sun shone, forming foliage patterns on the ship below.

Through the creepers fluttered several bright-feathered birds. They did not appear to fear the stranger. In the crow's nest of the foremast a pair of cockatoos were perched under a bit of old canvas. As Weatherbee eyed them, they cocked their heads to gaze down at him gravely.

By every sign, he judged the vessel to be utterly abandoned by human beings. Boldly he sprang to the foredeck, his stockinged feet tingling from the heat of the iron plates. Then, having slipped on his shoes, and with his pistol in his right hand, he walked aft, rattling the dead leaves as he went, and mounted the starboard ladder to the saloon deck.

There he came to a sudden stop; for, keyed up to a state of excitement by his adventure, his ears had caught a sound—a peculiar, whining, animal-like protest. Somehow it sounded familiar; and yet, in the almost complete silence that hung over hulk and mangroves, it rasped his nerves and sent a creepy feeling down his spine.

The sound seemed to come from the bridge, just over his head. He looked up through the ladder hatch, and finally climbed the ladder to the bridge. Once more he heard that peculiar sound. Now it seemed to come from the door of the little chart room abaft the wheel house.

Then he caught a movement in that direction. Up went the pistol, and he pointed it at the coaming of the chart room door. Sailing slowly along through the air, just above the brass covering of the coaming, he saw a thin, black object that resembled the head of a snake lifted to strike. It swayed and curled, and resolved itself into the tail of a black kitten.

Weatherbee gasped, then grinned.

"So!" he exclaimed, under his breath. "That much of the crew is left alive, eh?"

The kitten's yellow eyes spied him. With a little mew of welcome, she jumped the coaming, ran to him, and rubbed herself playfully against his ankles—a friendly act which reassured him not a little. He felt glad at the thought that he would have companionship.

"No native pirates here," he decided. "They wouldn't have a kitten around. Of course, a white man, if he lived here, would be likely to want some sort of a pet, whether he was a decent citizen or a rogue; but there isn't a white man aboard, because no white man would keep such a dirty deck."

Next, he had an uneasy thought:

"If this little thing's so young, does it mean that somebody's arrived here lately?"

A moment later, he smiled at his fears.

"A kitten means that its grandparents are the original castaways," he reasoned. "In which case, there'll be whole tribes of cats, and plenty of company at meals!"

With the kitten at his heels, he began to look about the bridge. There was not so much débris scattered about as might be expected where there was no overhead shelter. The brass rims of the wheel house ports were green with verdigris, and secured. The door of the chart room was open, but the ring knob looked as if it had not been cleaned for years.

Bent on finding the vessel's log, to learn when she had left civilization, and, therefore, how long she had been hidden away in this swamp, Weatherbee turned aft toward the chart room, and stepped across the brass coaming thick with mold.

He stooped as he went in, to avoid breaking the iridescent yet substantial web of gossamer that had been spun by some giant-sized spider. He trod upon a strip of carpet the red of which was blurred by leaves and the dust of leaves. The top of the navigator's table, and the narrow leather-cushioned cot built against the after bulkhead, were covered with an impalpable dust.

He looked for the steamer's name, and found it on a brass plate which was fastened on the forward bulkhead, between two portholes:

S. S. TAI-LAN

For a second time that day he gasped in amazement.

"The Tai-Lan! Why, it can't be! She foundered in a typhoon. Sailed from Manila for Hongkong, with cargo and passengers. That was about a year and a half ago, and the Tai-Lan is at the bottom of the China Sea!"

Yet he knew that this was she. There was her name plate, and on it the name of her builders—Skinner & Co., Newcastle.

In a silent whistle he expressed realization of the fact that he had made a startling discovery. Again he thought of pirates, and of a scheme to cheat the underwriters out of insurance.

"But where are her passengers?" he asked himself. "And what happened to her crew?"

A third explanation of the mystery suggested itself.

"Suppose somebody ran amuck during that last voyage, and killed everything that was alive except the ship's cat! In that case, the murderer may still be aboard. I'd better stop my prowling around, and wait right here until I know whether I'm alone or not!"

He tiptoed into the tiny wheel house, which, with its commanding position forward, gave a clear view of the untidy foredeck. He leaned on the wheel while he looked out; then he returned to the chart room, took a seat on the leather-cushioned cot, and rested his pistol on his knee.

"Skullduggery!" he pronounced again. "Say, but this steamer could tell a story!"

Almost holding his breath, he watched and listened. There were times when the rustle of a leaf misled him into the belief that some one was moving near by. At other times, he almost thought that the vague, indefinite murmur of the river was, instead, the sound of low, monotonous human voices.

At the end of an hour, he came to the conclusion that whatever culprit, or culprits, had brought the Tai-Lan into the swamp and hidden her, had long since disappeared into the jungle.

"I'm alone," he concluded. "This time I believe I've played in first-class luck. I'm going to stay; for, by thunder, I'll collect a pretty penny in salvage, and I'll—"

He did not finish the resolution. Suddenly turning his head, he caught sight of something that he had not noticed before—something that brought him to his feet. He took a long step forward, and leaned down.

Abaft the chart desk, on a tiny board jutting out from the bulkhead, lay a half smoked cigarette. One end of it was brown. He touched it with a finger, and found that it was still moist.

III

He backed away from the cigarette, as if it were capable of doing him bodily harm. Then he stood and stared at it, completely dumfounded.

"Hello!" he whispered. "There *is* somebody aboard! Who can it be—a white man, or a native? If it's a native, is it one of the river pirates they tell about?"

Then another thought occurred to him, and made him even more uneasy.

"Because I've found just one cigarette, here I'm taking it for granted that there's only one man aboard. That's a foolish conclusion. There's certainly one, but it's probable that there are several. To judge by the state of the ship, I'd say she's in the hands of natives. A white man would keep her in better shape—unless that foredeck is kept littered up to conceal the fact that the ship is inhabited. What in thunder am I up against?"

Along with his feeling of danger came a sense of disappointment.

"No salvage for me here!" he concluded. "I got out of the frying pan, but I've tumbled into the fire, and I'll be lucky if I come out of this with a whole skin. I'd better get away from here, even if I have to go back to the Lillebonne—if she's still in sight."

He gave a quick glance about him; then his look went back to the dead cigarette. He saw that it was of Chinese make.

"Maybe there's a coolie around," he thought, and the idea cheered him a little. "A Chinaman might have stumbled upon the steamer just the way I have, and might be using it as a living place."

However, he noted that the cigarette was of an expensive brand.

"A coolie wouldn't be smoking that kind, unless he got it from the ship's stores," he had to admit. "No, that cigarette belongs to a white man!"

Turning, he made a cautious survey of the foredeck, and studied the open scuttle of the forecastle.

"Suppose it *is* a white man," he reflected. "That doesn't mean that things are all right, by a long shot! The kind of a white man that would hide himself away in this tangle is the kind that a decent human being had better steer clear of. No mistake, the whole thing looks all wrong—rotten bad!"

An uncanny stillness hung over the steamer. Noon was at hand, and, with the sun blazing upon the swamp, all wild life was hidden and quiet. Taking care not to show his head at a port, Weatherbee seated himself again, to one side of the door.

"Won't take any chances of being seen or heard," he said. "When dark comes, I'll drop into the dinghy and feel my way out to the river."

Keeping absolutely still, and not taking a wary eye from the entrance, he waited. The kitten had wandered away, just where he did not know.

Early in the afternoon a breeze sprang up, and rustled the tops of the mangroves. Then once more he heard noises, though these seemed to come only from the jungle—lazy bird calls; heavy floppings from the swamp; the stir and whisper of leaves, dead as well as green; the far-off chattering of monkeys, and, coming down from the crow's nest, the derisory grumbling of the cockatoos.

When once more he heard the mewing of the black kitten, there came to him a grateful and reassuring thought that swung him back to a belief in his safety.

"A man can't be such a terrible rascal," he reflected, "if he cares about a pet!"

Feeling sure that his precautions were childish, and that he was actually in no danger, he thought of stepping out of the chart house and hallooing; but he speedily changed his mind.

"If I'm discovered aboard," he said, "how do I know that my host, or hosts, won't send me packing back to the Lillebonne—or wipe me out, to hide whatever the secret of this steamer is?"

So he stayed on, watching and listening, and turning the whole situation over and over in his mind, now leaning one way, now another, until finally he came to a certain conclusion. Strange as was the fact of his discovery of the lost Tai-Lan, he decided that whoever lived aboard her did so from his, or their, own free will. The lifeboats proved this, for even one man could get a boat into the river if he had plenty of time, and row out and away in search for help.

"Even if he just cruised off the river mouth by day," he argued, "and came back in here to spend the night, he'd meet up with some vessel in time. Yes, it's a case of voluntary exile," he declared; "and voluntary exile means just one thing—whoever's aboard is in hiding; and if a man is hiding, a strange visitor won't be welcome."

Once more his belief swung back, like a pendulum, to the side that was marked danger.

"To be found with a pistol in hand won't help me any," he thought. "Providing the possessor of the vessel saw me first, before I could explain I'd be plugged; for without a doubt, if he's dangerous, he'll be armed."

With that decision, the pistol went into a side pocket.

The time passed slowly. Here in the pilot house the air was close and stifling. He stood it patiently, not letting himself forget to keep on the alert. By four o'clock he had heard only one sound—faint, and far-off. It stilled so quickly that he felt inclined to question that he had ever heard it. What it had resembled was the soft shutting of a door.

A little later, however, he began to hear unmistakable noises—many of them. They seemed to come from several directions. He was not able to identify them. They were strange, and somewhat ratlike.

"Rats — maybe that's what I'm hearing," he thought. "There must be a lot of 'em in this hulk, which would explain why my cigarette smoker has a kitten."

Then, all at once, he heard a sound that he had heard before—heard it clearly, unmistakably. It was the same sound that he had heard when he was out in the dinghy—the sound that had brought him along the arched aisle of greenery to the ship. It was the high, silvery tinkle of a tiny gong-like bell.

One stroke — two — three; then, for a moment, silence.

Weatherbee waited, his body bent forward, his ears strained. Then came another surprise, one that sent his heart to bounding and thumping, brought him upright with the suddenness of an electric current, and turned him hot and cold.

From what seemed a considerable distance, in accents blurred and somewhat booming, as if they were sounding through a funnel, or out of a horn, there came, in rapid succession, and in a tone at once impatient, defiant, and despairing, three distinct sentences:

"If punishment is deserved, it may be right. What isn't deserved is wicked. I tell you, some day this account will be settled."

The voice was that of a woman.

IV

A WOMAN!

If the discovery of the ship had amazed Weatherbee, and the finding of the cigarette startled him, now he was both astounded and appalled. He stared about him helplessly. He pressed both hands to his head.

"A woman!" he breathed. "What's a *woman* doing on this murdered hulk, in this tangle of mangroves? And she's young—I know it by her voice. Her English was good, too. Furthermore, she's white. No educated native ever talks the way she did. Say, this is getting to be worse than uncanny!"

He tried to recall her words, but could not. However, he remembered that she had spoken of punishment.

"Punishment for what?" he asked himself. "Punishment by whom?" Then, laughing silently: "Is it possible I'm going off my head, and hearing gongs and voices? Or—is the old Tai-Lan haunted?"

In spite of the heat of the small, close chart house, he felt a sudden chill.

"I wish I'd kept off this blasted ship!" he muttered. "Why didn't I push on up the river? I'm in for more than I bargained for here. This East reeks with things that lift a man's hair. Call it witchcraft, or the supernatural, or bunk, but didn't I hear a jar produce a man's voice up in the country back of Selangor? I wish some scientific gentleman would explain that! And there was that Kling fakir who wrung out his goatskin water bag as if it were a wet bath towel, and tossed it into the air. When it came down, he said a lot of gibberish, and the confounded thing slowly filled with water! *That* wasn't trickery. And the old priest at Ulyasutai—if he didn't show me my mother in a wisp of smoke that he sent up, then I don't know my own mother!"

Though he had experienced a creepy feeling, he was not actually afraid. Rather, he was filled with a mixture of awe and curiosity, as he had been near Selangor, and at Ulyasutai, and elsewhere. The woman's voice that he had heard had apparently come out of the air as distinctly as if she had spoken in the chart room.

"If Blinker Noakes was to appear in front of me," he thought, "I'd take a dive into the brown soup overside. What's here, even if it's magic, can't be as hard to get on with as that precious mate. The shelter of this old hulk isn't to be lightly abandoned—at least while the Lillebonne's likely to be still outside; so I won't be driven away by a spook!"

His roving eye rested upon the butt of the cigarette.

"There's no imagination in that," he added, and could not help grinning. "It's made out of real tobacco, and the printing's real, too. If I wanted to, I could light up what's left of it, and smoke it. Even in Borneo, I don't believe that ghosts smoke!"

He stood without moving, and strained his ears to listen, hoping that he would hear the voice a second time.

"Maybe the only person left alive here is a woman," he thought. "Perhaps she talks aloud to herself; but if that's the explanation, how does it happen that she seemed to be speaking right at my elbow?"

The next moment, here was the black

kitten again; and the sight of the little purring creature instantly reassured him.

"She's well fed," he observed. "What's more, she's not a bit wild. I'm not the first human being that she's ever seen. If I were, she wouldn't come near me. No, there's somebody aboard who isn't a discarnate being. A woman's here, for sure, and maybe there's a man here, too!"

However, he decided to stay where he was, and not to venture out of the chart house until after dark.

"Meanwhile," he said hopefully, "I may possibly get a look at the kitten's owner."

He did. Turning from the door to glance out upon the foredeck once more, he saw, standing with feet wide apart on the untidy deck plates below him, a man.

"Hello, there!" the man called up to him cordially.

Weatherbee noted, first of all, that the man did not look like a pirate, a lunatic, a murderer, or a wraith. He was of medium height, of middle age, and of rather bulky build. From hat to shoes he was dressed in white, all his apparel being immaculately clean. About his full waist was bound a cummerbund of figured silk.

"A well bathed, sensible-looking Anglo-Saxon!" was Weatherbee's silent comment.

The soft, wide rim of the other man's hat shaded a broad, fleshy, sunburned face that was divided by a black mustache. His eyes squinted so that Weatherbee could not make out either their color or their expression; but his mouth wore a friendly smile. He did not appear to be armed.

"Hello, sir!" Weatherbee called back, feeling thankful that the man below him showed no alarm at his presence, no fear, no trace of resentment, and no surprise.

The man continued to smile.

"Well!" he exclaimed. "Glad to see you! Can you play cribbage?"

Weatherbee laughed, not only feeling relief, but considering himself in luck.

"A little," he replied.

"Good! That's what I was wishin' when I seen you swarm up the anchor chain."

"Hope you're not sorry to see me," Weatherbee went on; but he wondered why this man had taken so long to make himself known, if he had seen the stranger coming aboard the Tai-Lan that morning. "Hope I'm not intruding."

"I'll say you're not!" the man answered heartily. He was unmistakably pleased, even enthusiastic, over the younger man's coming. "Why didn't you give us a halloo when you came alongside? We'd have helped you aboard."

Weatherbee took mental note of the word "us."

"I thought the steamer was derelict and deserted," he explained. "Why didn't you halloo to me?"

The big man gave a wag of the head.

"Afraid I might scare you off," he declared. "You was terrible quiet. Why was that?"

"I did have a thought or two about pirates," Weatherbee admitted.

The other laughed outright.

"I don't blame you," he asserted; "but you sure tickled me a lot as I watched you. Your face! Say, you was the most surprised-lookin' feller I ever seen in all my life!"

Weatherbee nodded.

"I was surprised, all right," he admitted; "especially when I saw your cigarette. Knew, of course, that Borneo monkeys don't smoke cigarettes."

"Anybody with you?"

"I hope not."

"H-m! You hope not!"

Weatherbee explained that he had not cared for the company of the men he had lately been with.

"What ship you out of?" the other man inquired.

For an instant Weatherbee held back his answer, not knowing how to reply—whether evasively, or untruthfully, or with the facts.

"The Lillebonne, schooner," he finally called down. "She's outside—or was—anchored during the night in a fog, more or less becalmed. If she got a wind, she's probably gone."

"I see! Where from, and where bound for?"

"From Manila to Tanjong Priok—Batavia, you know."

"Well, s'pose you come below, and we find a chair in the shade and have a swaller of somethin'—tea, anyhow?"

"Thanks! I'm as hungry as a hound, and dog-tired."

As he descended to the saloon deck, the other came up to meet him, put out a freckled hand, and fairly wrung that of his visitor.

"My name's Markin," he said; "Nicholas Markin."

His eyes were black. Just then their look was both quizzical and penetrating.

"I'm Francis Weatherbee — from all over the East, but originally from the United States of America."

"Yankee, eh? The same here! So come ahead aft, and when we've had a bite of tiffin you can take a snooze. Aft, here, we've got hammocks, and so on. Can't say it's cool, but—"

With a gesture, he led the way, going with a peculiar lurching, lamish gait, as if his ankles were weak, or as if at some time one of his legs had been slightly injured.

As they reached the ladder leading down to the well deck, Weatherbee saw what gave him a pleasurable surprise. Everywhere there were signs of care. The plates of the deck were clean. No vine came farther than the rail, except overhead, where the jungle met, shutting out the sun and making a grateful shade, into which the two descended.

Under the cargo boom of the mainmast a hammock was lashed. Several deck chairs were ranged to right and left of the hammock. Beside one of these, and close to the door of the hand-wheel house, which occupied the large space under the raised quarter-deck, was Weatherbee's bundle, which had evidently been fished out of the dinghy while he was in the chart house. The most welcome object of all, to him, was a small folding table, over which was arranged a spotlessly white cloth.

Markin waved a hand toward a folding chair, which was set on the closed after hatch.

"Sit down," he invited.

"If this isn't luck!" Weatherbee ejaculated, smiling about him as he accepted the invitation.

One thing became clear to him at once—the source of those musical sounds which had brought him pushing in through the roots of the mangroves. For, stepping aside to a door which led into the passage forward, Markin picked up a small hammer and rang a smart summons on a gong. A moment later, as the elder man dropped his bulk into the hammock, there came pattering out a Malay in a bright red sarong that reached to his brown ankles.

"Dukun," said Markin lazily, "tell Kum Lee to send out some tea and—let me see—yes, some of that curried fish I had for lunch. Biscuits, too, of course, and anything else that happens to be ready."

The Malay bowed.

"*Ai, tuan,*" he replied, and, without looking at Weatherbee, turned and hurried back into the passage.

Almost at once the welcome clicking of dishes sounded from below, and the voices of two men came to Weatherbee's ears. The two were speaking, not some strange tongue, but the pidgin English familiar to the visitor.

"You're mighty comfortable here," observed the latter, continuing to glance about him. "I just can't get over it, somehow—this steamer, and you, and servants, and—and all the rest of it, in this jungle, where a man naturally looks for nothing but monkeys and crocodiles and snakes!"

Markin's dark eyes seemed as frank as possible.

"Don't wonder you're surprised," he answered. "And now I'm better off than ever—I got comp'ny!"

Leaning back in the hammock, he fanned his big face with his hat.

"Nice of you to put it that way," declared Weatherbee. "I certainly appreciate your welcome, and your hospitality. When I first caught sight of the steamer, I don't mind telling you that I had thoughts of salvage, and figured that I'd blundered upon a small fortune; but the way things have turned out is ten times better!"

Markin chuckled.

"You've sure lost out on the salvage proposition," he returned. "I'm in charge here for the owner."

"You've been in here a long time, I should judge."

"Not so long—only fourteen months."

"Only fourteen!" Weatherbee whistled. Then, raising his eyes to the tent of green above him: "Do you mean that all this overhead—"

"Jungle can do 'most anything on short notice," Markin reminded him.

"And you've been aboard here all the time?"

"Fact! So you'll understand why I was so all-fired pleased a bit ago when I seen you pussy-footin' over the bow." Then, with a keen, steady look: "Ain't runnin' away from your ship, are you?"

Weatherbee's look was equally straight and steady.

"Yes," he answered. "I have left my ship; but don't let that give you a wrong idea about me."

"No, no, no!" The reassurance was

given hastily. "I ain't goin' to pronounce on you at all, anyhow not until I've heard what you got to say for yourself. I know ships and sailors. I can see with half an eye that them clothes you got on don't jibe with you. Make fast to my meanin'? You ain't no foremast hand—no dungaree A.B."

"Quite correct!" Weatherbee admitted. "When I got ready to get away, I put on these duds to save my others. They're in the bundle here. The schooner had a native crew. I was second mate."

Dukun returned, bringing a large wicker tray. Soon, a place having been laid with glistening china, shining glass, and polished silver, Weatherbee drew up, and became pleasurably occupied with pouring out tea and helping himself generously to fish served with curry, and to an excellent salad made from bamboo shoots.

"Green grub goes down easy," Markin observed.

"I've been eating nothing but tinned stuff for days," Weatherbee rejoined. "I'm pretty much of a lubber, and not used to sea fare. Naturally, this kind of a spread carries me back to the Grand Oriental at Colombo. You must have a first-chop *chef* in the galley!"

Markin chuckled.

"Kum Lee's no slouch," he boasted, with another wag of his big head. "He's been in the boss's employ since I don't know when. Old servant, you understand—would do 'most anything for him. When the boss left me here, he figured there was one way to keep me contented, and that was to give me good grub. From the first day, old Kum Lee's laid himself out to get me the best meals he knowed how. Every day, rain or sun, off he goes into the jungle."

"Then you're able to get ashore?"

Markin jerked a thumb.

"Bamboo bridge over the stern," he explained. "Other end of it's on solid ground. It ain't easy to see, on account of the creepers. It's what you might call our rear exit. I been tellin' Kum Lee that some day he'd go, and he wouldn't come back, because a snake 'd get him; but that Chink ain't 'fraid o' nothin'. Brings back all kinds o' stuff. Yesterday we had yams."

"Certainly it was lucky for me that I happened in here!" asserted Weatherbee fervently.

"Biggest piece o' luck you've ever had," chimed in the other. "Why, this part o' the Borneo coast is the wildest strip on the whole island. Up and down, for I don't know how many miles, there ain't even a native. As for the river, there's twenty miles of hard rowin' before you reach the first Dyak village. Guess you'd have reached it—if you didn't happen to git the fever."

"Or to starve to death!"

Markin blinked solemn black eyes at his guest. "Must have been somethin' pretty bad that made you jump your ship," he declared sympathetically. "You don't look like you was a hard man to get along with. Do you mind tellin' me what happened?"

"Not a bit, seeing that I've crawled in here and wished myself on you. As a matter of fact, I think it's what I ought to do."

"Good! You tell me your story, and then I'll tell you mine. Naturally, you'd like to know why this old craft is tied up here."

"It certainly ought to be interesting; but it's probably simple enough, seeing that you're aboard. At first I thought I'd happened on a tragedy, a marine mystery, a piece of villainy; but people who are up to shady business with ships don't invite guests, who've wandered in, to have lunch and stay. So I'll cut loose with my tale of woe."

The fish and salad having disappeared, Weatherbee drew back from the table and lighted a cigarette.

"My story's not a bit exciting," he began. "During the war, I was in the navy. After the armistice, I made up my mind to see the East, by working my passage from port to port. I wasn't exactly what you'd call broke. I haven't got enough to brag about, but lack of passage money wasn't what decided me. I didn't want to see this side of the world from the first-cabin, best-hotel point of view."

"I understand, I understand," said Markin, nodding his approval.

"I've trailed through Japan, China, Mongolia, Corea, the Straits Settlements, and a good part of India. Two months ago I got to Manila. When I'd seen all I cared to of the Philippines, I thought of Java. I heard the Lillebonne was going to Batavia, and I asked her skipper, a man named Blodgett, to take me along. He was drunk at the time, and he told me to go aboard with him. Many a time since then I've wished that he'd been sober!"

Markin shook with silent laughter.

"Let yourself in for somethin', eh? Skipper a bad one?"

"It wasn't the skipper. Blodgett's a heavy drinker, but in other ways he's a fairly decent man. No, it was the mate, a man named Noakes."

Markin bent his head forward, as if he had not heard plainly.

"Named what?" he inquired.

"Noakes—Blinker Noakes. Never was more mistaken in a man in all my life. Can't understand it, either. Not that I'm a dead certain judge of people, for I'm not; but my first impressions are generally more or less right, and when I first met Noakes I thought he was a decent chap. Queer-looking, you understand, but he had a good eye and a good mouth—and you know how much depends on a man's eyes and mouth. But—"

Weatherbee paused, shaking his head. Once more Markin chuckled, and his dark eyes twinkled with humor.

"His nose and chin was wrong, eh?"

Weatherbee could not share the other's amusement.

"I'll be hanged if I know what was the matter," he replied. "Anyhow, we'd no more than cleared Manila Bay when he began to perform. First off, he wanted to know all my private business. When I wouldn't tell him the story of my life, then I couldn't do anything that pleased him. Next, I found out that he was suspicious of me."

"Why was that? Suspicious of what?"

"I don't know. I wish I did. The third night out, as I lay asleep in my bunk, I suddenly got the feeling that somebody was in my cabin. I opened my eyes. Sure enough, there was Noakes, leaning over me. I sat up so quick that I almost bumped his face; and I'll never forget how it looked, with his teeth bared like a mad dog's. What do you think he'd been doing? Going through my papers and letters!"

Markin pursed his mustached lips and wrinkled his forehead.

"Snoopy bird, wasn't he? Queer!" he acquiesced. "Going through your stuff, huh. I wonder what he was lookin' for! Or maybe he's light-fingered."

"No, that wasn't it. Only explanation I can give is that he's crazy."

"Ever suspect that he hit the pipe, or chewed opium?"

"If he did, it didn't affect his treatment of the crew. He was never ugly to the men—never banged them around. So far as I can judge, the only man he hated was myself; but to me, after I caught him snooping in my cabin that time, he suddenly developed into a regular hellion. He snarled at me like a tiger for no reason at all, and hunted excuses to curse me in front of the crew. I began to believe that he intended to brain me, and that I'd be forced to murder him in self-defense. I didn't want to do that; so I decided to get out."

As Markin had listened, gradually a strange expression had settled upon his big, full face.

"M-m-m!" he mused. "He must have gone what I call red-eyed. Mates get that way sometimes. I suppose you went to the skipper?"

"No, I didn't, because I'd figured it would only make things worse. In the first place, Blodgett seemed to think Noakes was all right; and, in the second, the captain was drunk about three-fourths of the time. Never saw a man who could pour so much alcohol down his throat and live. The skipper's actually pickled in gin. When he's sober, he feels pretty sick—the effect of all the booze he's thrown into him. To get better, he drinks more booze. Then he feels all right, but he's too tipsy to talk."

"I savvy the kind," Markin said wisely; "but you'd think the owners would get sick of havin' the man handlin' their schooner."

"I fancy he's one of the owners," Weatherbee returned. "Must be, or he'd have been fired long ago. But to finish my sad tale—when we made Borneo as a landfall, the captain, who was drunker than usual, ordered Noakes to anchor—said we needed fresh water, though the butts were practically full. The mate always humors Blodgett's notions, so anchor we did. There wasn't much wind, anyway, and I figured that the skipper wanted an excuse for staying on his spree. Next, Noakes had a bo'sun's chair over the side, and men were set to work chipping and painting the stern. That's how the dinghy happened to be lowered. It gave me my chance. Yesterday Noakes took a turn for the worse—acted like a raving maniac, so that it was plain as a pikestaff to me that he wanted me off the schooner. In the middle of the night—"

There was no more to tell. Gesturing with both hands, Weatherbee hunted another cigarette, lighted it, and settled back.

"Crocodiles and snakes in preference to a loony mate," remarked his host facetiously, yet not without understanding.

"Not to mention Dyaks who might like to get hold of a good boat and my few belongings."

"All the same, I don't blame you for diggin' out."

"It was about the only thing I could possibly do."

After that, for a while, neither spoke. Overhead and about them, the wind gently stirred the leaves and blossoms. Birds fluttered and called. Presently, making a tremendous racket in the foliage, a troop of monkeys came into sight, swinging themselves from mangrove to mangrove, screaming and chattering. To pass the Tai-Lan, the little animals made a slight detour; then, a free and happy horde, they went swinging on.

"This might be a comfortable house boat," observed Weatherbee. He gave his host a contented grin. "Or a yacht at anchor."

"Must tell you the story about this poor old tub," Markin drawled.

The younger man smiled and nodded, but said nothing, forbearing to urge the other, and hiding his own intense interest. Something warned him not to confess to Markin that he had heard anything of the reported disaster to the Tai-Lan. But just now, more than anything else, he wanted to know how this man would account for having been aboard the derelict steamer for fourteen months.

Presently Markin stirred, heaved his big body up, and took a bunch of keys from a pocket of his trousers.

"Been pleased to listen to what you've had to say," he declared. "Now I know you've give it to me straight, I'm goin' to tell you about the Tai-Lan, and you're goin' to have it all just as straight. I might as well be open and aboveboard, for the reason that there ain't no use my lyin' to you, or tryin' to fool you. You'd get the low-down anyhow."

He stood up and glanced at a watch strapped to his fat wrist.

"Before I get to goin' on my yarn, if you'll please to excuse me, I'll take a look at the insurance."

Saying which, he went lurching past Weatherbee's chair to the door of the hand-wheel house.

Puzzled, and also a trifle concerned, the younger man straightened and looked around.

"The *insurance?*" he repeated.

Weatherbee told himself that he had not heard correctly. A curious smile was hovering about Markin's mustached lips.

"Insurance is what I call it," he explained. "Of course, you've already guessed that the Tai-Lan ain't stuck here in the mud for nothin'—a ship worth all she was, and left to go to rack and ruin. No, there's a reason, and it's one her owner thinks is good, or he wouldn't do it."

"Naturally!"

Weatherbee's eyes studied the other's.

"There's a whole lot of explosives in the hold," Markin went on; "powder and dynamite, and so on."

"I see!"

Weatherbee guessed that the whole explanation of this strange mystery would lie in some scheme for supplying either Dyaks or Chinese with arms and ammunition for raids on more civilized portions of the country, or for piratical operations.

"About a ton of explosives, I guess," continued Markin, speaking quite casually. "Fixed to 'em all with a connectin' wire is what you might call a clockwork contrivance."

Startled, the younger man managed to control himself; but once more the thought occurred to him that he might be dealing with a sick brain—one that was weakened, or that had been powerfully affected by the jungle heat.

"A clockwork contrivance," Markin repeated. "Every so often I have to wind it and put it in shape. I'm the only man aboard that knows how to fix the thing, and I'd be awful sorry for everybody else if anything was to happen to me, because if I was to neglect to set it back to safety—"

"You mean—" Weatherbee began, then held his breath.

Markin jangled the keys, found the right one, and inserted it into the lock of the hand-wheel house door. "You see, if I didn't," he went on, "it wouldn't be a bit healthy for the bunch of us, because the flat truth is that the Tai-Lan would be blowed to smithereens!"

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Here was another astounding thing, in a day that seemed to Weatherbee to be packed with happenings which were fairly dumfounding! He shifted his eyes to the iron deck plates, where green and gold specks danced before them dizzily.

"So!" he exclaimed. "I'm sitting on a deck, am I, that's got a ton of powder under it, all ready, at the tick of some clock, to lift the whole business into the air?"

Suddenly he stood up.

"While this chap's away," he asked himself, "hadn't I better grab my things and get away?"

The next moment he had his bundle in his hand, and had faced about in the direction of that bamboo bridge; but as suddenly he determined not to leave. He remembered the voice he had heard in the chart house, and that recollection made him forget himself.

"Have I any right to go," he went on, "before I know who that woman is? I'm dead sure she's in trouble. If she isn't, she'd be out here on deck. Can I dig off and save my own skin, and leave behind a woman who's likely to be blown up?"

He turned back to his chair, dropped his belongings, and again sat down.

"I can't go," he declared. "If I did, I'd feel like a rotter for the rest of my life. Let the old tub blow up! If I go with her, so must Markin; and, one thing sure, it 'll be a quick and painless exit. But it isn't likely that Markin will care to pass out in just that way. He'll look after his clockwork, and if it doesn't get out of order, I'll be safer here than I would be in the jungle. What's more, there's queer work aboard, and there's an explanation behind this whole proposition that 'll be worth hearing. I'll stick, and, if I live, I'll see it through!"

Dukun, the Malay, now came pattering back, tray in hand. As he cleared the table, his slender brown hands moving fast, if not a trifle nervously, he did not take his eyes from his work to glance at the stranger.

For his own part, Weatherbee did not address the man, but studied him carefully, noting that he was much older than he had appeared to be on first sight. The brown man was not armed. He was plainly anxious to get away.

He went, and, with a creaking of the door of the hand-wheel house, Markin came back.

"That contraption's a nuisance," he complained fretfully. "It's a case of watch, watch, watch. It's the only job I got, but I'd like to disconnect it if I could. It's wearin', if you get what I mean—even if it is put here so that nobody'll take the chance of botherin' me. For instance, if you was to pull that gun of yours, and shoot me down, or chase me off, it would be the same as if you was to commit suicide—the same as sure death. You wouldn't be able to leave the ship, and you don't know how to set the clock to safety."

To that Weatherbee made no reply, believing it best to appear wholly indifferent.

"You needn't feel a bit scared, though," Markin continued. "Every time after I set 'em, the works is O. K. for quite a little, and I don't never forget to fix 'em before they can run down."

He was back in the hammock at once, puffing a fresh cigarette.

"Don't believe, anyhow, that they'll get on my nerves any more like the way they been doin'. Man alive, but I've been lonesome here!"

"But you're not alone," Weatherbee commented. "You've been using the word 'we.' Do you mean just the servants, or are there other people in the ship?"

"There's been three whites here all along," Markin answered. "One's a man named Houghton, and the other's a — a lady."

The black eyes fixed themselves on Weatherbee, as if marking the effect of the information.

"Must be rather a lonely life for a woman," Weatherbee returned.

Markin sat up.

"You don't act a darned bit surprised that there's a lady in the Tai-Lan!"

Weatherbee laughed.

"Mr. Markin, I've reached the point where nothing surprises me."

The elder man grinned appreciatively, and allowed himself to slump back.

"I can understand that," he admitted. "Well, besides us three whites, there's three native boys. Two you know about; the other's Gajah, which means elephant. He's the feller that watches from sun-up to sundown at the shore end of the bamboo bridge astern. If any of us was to try to get away—"

Markin tossed both hands significantly. It was then that, for the first time, Weatherbee understood that some, if not all, of those aboard were prisoners. However, he forbore to comment on this.

"Nobody ever has got away?" he inquired, silently congratulating himself on having changed his mind about seeking to escape by means of the bamboo bridge.

"One figured he could—a Malay he was, named Yatin. Made a sneak one day about noon. Didn't get very far, though. I heard a *bang, bang*—Gajah's a first-class shot. Six months ago it happened. That was the last of Yatin."

"I should think that with six humans around," Weatherbee went on, "you ought to be able to pass the time without being too lonesome—especially as one passenger's a lady."

"I s'pose it's natural to take it for granted that the lady'd be a help," Markin returned; "but wait till you see her! You'll savvy then why she don't add to *my* happiness none. Oh, my aunt!"

"Down on you?"

"Like poison! I didn't have nothin' to do with puttin' her here, and it ain't my doin's that she's kept here. It's all owner's orders. I'll bet you wonder what's behind such a queer state of things!"

"I'm certainly puzzled," Weatherbee confessed. "The first guess that comes to a man's mind is that the owner's collecting insurance—both marine and life, perhaps."

Markin was obviously enjoying the novel situation.

"Say!" he exclaimed. "If you had ten thousand guesses, you couldn't guess it right! No, sir, not if your life was at stake, you couldn't!" He rolled his big head from side to side. "Insurance! That would mean a lot, I s'pose, to some owners; but not in this case. Why, this steamer was worth a third more'n what she was insured for. As for the lady, she wasn't insured at all. Anyway, what would a few thousand dollars more or less mean to a man as rich as Thaddeus H. Stone?"

Weatherbee's jaw dropped. He fixed wondering eyes on the speaker.

"Thaddeus Stone?" he demanded. "The Thaddeus Stone who owns the big sugar estates and tin mines, and grows his own sago for his own factories in the Moluccas, and runs two or three lines of freight steamers?"

"That's the feller. Owns a lot of islands, too, you know. Down in these parts his name is just the same as if you'd say Rockefeller in New York."

The younger man was still staring.

"I should say so!" he ejaculated. "And you're right, Mr. Markin. In ten thousand guesses I wouldn't be able to pick the right one. Old Thad Stone! No, the thing's beyond me!"

The elder man lowered one plump hand to the top of his head, and gave his hair a moment's roughing. He circled his lips with the tip of his tongue, like one who is thoroughly enjoying a situation.

"Thaddeus Stone," he repeated, with a touch of boastfulness. "And this here's the steamer that foundered with all hands aboard—includin' Stone's wife!"

This last was said with so much significance that Weatherbee began to see the light.

"Yes," he said slowly, "I remember that Stone's wife was one of those who went down with the Tai-Lan. She was very young, wasn't she, and beautiful? I remember how much there was about her in the English papers down along the China coast."

"I went down in the Tai-Lan, too." The dark eyes were glinting mischievously. "So did Mr. Houghton, that's here with me. You can see for yourself, Mr. Weatherbee, you're either at the bottom of the China Sea, or you're associatin' with a bunch of spooks!"

He guffawed, but Weatherbee did not laugh.

"I realize," returned the younger man, "that there are good reasons—and they're not money reasons, either—why Mr. Stone has tied up the Tai-Lan here. I suppose, when I know those reasons, I won't be as surprised as I am at present."

"The story starts back three years," continued Markin, half musingly. "That was when the boss first met the present Mrs. Stone. He was cruisin' around in his yacht at the time. Stopped one day at a little island where there was a widow lady by the name of Loring. This lady's husband had been a missionary. Bein' a good one, when he died, he didn't leave her enough to buy a bunch of bananas. What's more, she didn't have good health. The way she got along was by keepin' house for the new missionary, who was a bach."

"Mr. Stone didn't marry this lady?"

"Not on your life he didn't! That's where he made his grand mistake. She had a daughter that was nineteen at the time. Mr. Stone married the daughter."

"Ah!"

Weatherbee guessed now whose voice it was that had carried up to him from somewhere below when he was in the chart house.

"Mrs. Thaddeus Stone!" he marveled to himself. "She's aboard here! Twenty-two, and they said she was as beautiful as a dream. Christopher Columbus, but I've stumbled into a mess!"

Markin was going on.

"She's one peach to look at, that girl, and smart as paint. Her father had a fine eddication, and he learned her everything he could. Also, her ma give her lessons in paintin', and sewin', and playin' the piano. She can sing, too, and her manners is grand. On that island, though, she'd never met many white folks. Barrin' her father, I shouldn't wonder if the first real gent she ever met was Mr. Stone himself; and that just about explains most of what happened afterward. At the time, she certainly liked to go aboard Mr. Stone's yacht, and eat the grand meals, and be waited on by Malays in turbans, and get a look at what you might call an honest-to-goodness swell boat. Maybe she liked Mr. Stone, too—at the time. He's a grand man. A little old for her, of course, but a person can't have everything at once, and he had scads of money, and spent it like a reg'lar maharaja.

"Well, him and she had a mighty jolly time of it for a couple of weeks. Then he up and popped the question; and I don't know's I blame her for sayin' yes. His own captain married 'em—skipper of the Arcadia. Away they sailed, with her mother along, of course; and that was the last of island livin', and the beginnin' of a kind of fairy tale experience for her. He give her the yacht. He give her everything else she wanted, too — cars, horses, diamonds, pearls, elephants to ride upon, as the song goes; private railroad car when she traveled in China, clothes from Paree, France, and so on, and so forth. All the time, though, almost from the start-off, it seems, he didn't trust her. I don't know why—he ain't never told me. I heard a certain man say that if they'd stayed down where they first met, it would have been all right; but when they got where there were young men around, trouble begun. What did she do? I can't say. Anyhow, he was jealous.

"As I told you a bit ago, she's a fine-lookin' woman. Of course, all the young men, soon as ever they spotted her, they liked her. Couldn't blame 'em much, neither. She hadn't been raised in no stylish boardin' school. She was what you might call natural, and simple, and mighty likable. None of us figured she'd be up to tricks. Just the same, she was a bit tricky; and this is where our gent, Houghton, comes in."

Markin jerked a thumb toward a door which opened to a forward passage through the steamer's superstructure.

"I'd say Houghton's about twelve years older than her. He was fine to her at dinners and dances, and she showed she liked him. Mr. Stone had 'em watched; but they must've been pretty cute, because the boss told me himself that he never was able to prove that they met on the quiet. Of course, give folks enough rope, and you savvy what 'll happen. That's how it worked with Mr. Houghton and Mrs. Stone. One day, in Manila, she remarked how she'd like to take a run up to Hongkong. Mr. Stone said he couldn't go. As the yacht was in dry dock, he had two of the old Tai-Lan's cabins throwed together, put in a baby grand piano, and generally fixed things up like for a princess. Just about then he discovered that Houghton was to be a passenger on the trip. Then the boss tumbled. He didn't let on he knew, though. What he done was to dope out a plan to punish 'em. To make a long story short, the Tai-Lan steamed out of Manila, went a sufficient way on her course toward Hongkong, then doubled on her tracks and made for here; and here she's been ever since!"

Markin paused, gave another polish to his head, then yawned behind a large, soft hand.

"Ever since," he repeated, cocking an eye at the canopy of vines.

Weatherbee, his look averted, uttered a long, low whistle.

"Strange things come under a man's eyes out here in the East," he observed; "and of all the things that a chap could stumble on, I think this is certainly the strangest!"

"Just how do you mean?" Markin wanted to know.

"Why, shutting a woman up like this! Doesn't it strike you like a sort of a bad dream, or like what some Eastern potentate might think up? To me, it doesn't seem as if it could have been planned by a white man's brain!"

"Oh, I don't know," Markin returned. "Maybe it just happens to strike you that way. It don't me. I mean this—back in the States, or in England, a man that's got lots of money is able to do some funny things, ain't he? Course he is! The only difference is that back there he wouldn't take chances on doin' the same kind of funny things that he's able to do out here. Now, say Stone was back home. Instead of shuttin' Mrs. Stone up in an old hulk, like this, he'd plant servants on her, train 'em in what they was to swear to, and then he'd get her put away in an insane asylum. It's been done."

Weatherbee nodded.

"I suppose it has."

"Why, of course it has! Money's a powerful thing, Mr. Weatherbee. It can hire witnesses, and it can hire doctors, too. In fact, in my opinion, Mr. Stone could have pulled the thing off that way safer than this way; but then I'm not handin' him advice."

"There's one question I'd like to ask you," said Weatherbee.

"Shoot!"

"I hope you won't mind my asking you how it happens that a man of your caliber—for you strike me as a reasonable man—can be hired to do a thing of this kind. You're running a risk, too."

"Now you've hit it!" Markin returned warmly. "With that darned contraption aboard, which I have to watch like it was a snake ready to jump, I'll say I *am* runnin' a risk! I don't want to be blasted into the vines up yonder any more than you do."

"You really can't unhitch the thing?"

"I was told I'd better not touch it, and you'd better believe I've minded what I was told. Yes, sir! But to tell you about my bein' here—I'm like Kum Lee, in the galley. For years the boss has been wonderful to me—paid me good, treated me fine, been square and kind and open-handed. When he put the thing up to me, I said, 'Boss, I don't like the job, but I'll do it.' Now you got the whole truth."

"Pretty tough punishment!" Weatherbee said solemnly. "I'd hate to have the business on my conscience."

"As I look at it," Markin answered, "I'm savin' both their lives. If Mr. Stone found out he couldn't hold 'em here, he'd have 'em both killed."

"But don't you think that what's being done is worse than murder?"

"No, I can't say as I do. They ain't so awful bad off."

Weatherbee shook his head solemnly.

"But do you think that any man has a right to take punishment into his own hands? It seems to me that he could have followed a more lawful program."

"Lawful!" snorted Markin. "Will you tell me what law there is that 'll punish a pretty girl who goes ahead and deliberately marries an old man—she wasn't forced into it, mind—and then don't give him a square deal? Name one case of this kind where a rich man's ever been able to fall back upon the law!"

"I might argue that the law should have protected her in the first place," persisted Weatherbee earnestly. "Stone married this girl when she was a minor—too young to sign away a house, or an acre of land; but she could sign herself away. It seems cruel!"

"I agree with you there. When the two of them turned up in Manila, people said it would have been decenter if he'd married the mother. The fact is, though, that he didn't marry the mother; and when the girl had made her bargain, she ought to have stayed by it, specially when he was so doggone good to her."

"Grant that he was generous," returned the younger man. "That doesn't prove that he was easy to live with. In fact, what he's done leads me to believe that he must have been a difficult proposition; and there she was, young, good-looking, meeting men of her own age. It's tragic to me, Mr. Markin. She must have realized her mistake, and—"

"A-a-a-ah!" Markin lifted a forefinger and shook it wisely. "Call it tragic, if you want to, Mr. Weatherbee; but she didn't stop spendin' his money. Do you get me? She kept on usin' his check book, same as all those kind of dames that acts like they never was married. Tragic! Huh! For Mr. Stone, it was, all right! If she seen what a mistake she'd made, why didn't she put a few things into a trunk, and dig out, and look for work? Oh, no! Nothin' like that! She didn't give up the whole floor he fitted out for her in the best hotel in Manila. The place was too soft to kiss good-by to. Too soft for ma, too. What Mrs. Stone aimed to do was eat her cake and keep it."

Again Weatherbee was thinking, his hands stuffed in his pockets, his eyes on the deck.

"You may be right," he said. "Of course, the whole terrible business goes back to that mother. She should have known from the very first that the marriage was wrong."

Markin chuckled.

"She *did* know," he replied; "but after twenty years of helpin' to teach the natives to act like white folks, she went straight against what was right and decent—straight against it—and let that girl marry a man old enough to be her grandfather."

"About the elopement with this man Houghton, though—what does Mrs. Stone have to say on the subject?"

"Swears she's innocent. I'll be honest enough to say that in all these fourteen months I ain't seen that woman do one thing that wasn't ladylike, nor heard her speak one word that wasn't nice. Honest, I haven't, and I've watched the two of 'em like a hawk."

"For Heaven's sake, why don't you make that report to Mr. Stone?" begged Weatherbee.

"Oh, I have—I have."

"Then surely he'll believe you. He'll give them a couple of years here, perhaps—to think things over, or to get sick of the very sight of each other. When he gets over his mad—"

Markin smiled and wagged his big head.

"S'pose he does? That wouldn't make no difference, for two reasons. The first one is the reason behind them bein' here. He shut 'em up here because he didn't want this side of the world to know that, old and rich like he is, he'd been made a fool of by a younger man. That's one reason which 'll keep 'em here. Mr. Stone don't intend to be laughed at in every club in the East."

"I see! It's his pride."

"Exactly. And I understand how he feels. It ain't no joke havin' all your friends nearly bu'stin' the buttons off their vests at the old husband. Would you or me like it? You bet your boots we would *not!* And Mr. Stone drawed the line at sufferin' shame because he'd treated this girl first-class."

Weatherbee nodded.

"I understand, too, to a certain extent," he declared.

"Now take the second reason," Markin went on. "We'll grant he admits the lady and Mr. Houghton never was in love, and wasn't elopin'. All right! But the trouble is, Mr. Stone's gone so far, by all he's done here"—both fat hands gestured to take in the vine-hung vessel—"that now he just can't back down."

"Even if they were planning to elope, do you think they deserve what they're getting?"

Markin shrugged.

"I ain't the judge. I'm here to look after 'em, and I do just that—treat 'em right, make 'em comfortable, see that they get the best of everything. That's where my job ends."

Weatherbee drew a gasping breath.

"You mean that Stone has done a terrible thing to these two, who are probably innocent," he said, "and that even if he finds out that he's wrong, he can't turn 'em loose?"

"You don't know the boss like I do. Put yourself in Mr. Stone's place," suggested Markin. "S'pose he turned Houghton and the lady loose? After all this business here, if he had to own up that he'd made a mistake—"

"What would that matter? It's time that he forgot what people are going to think. It's the right and wrong of the thing that counts. If these two are innocent, it's a fearful injustice for them to be shut away, month after month, in this rotting ship, where there's an infernal machine set to blow them to bits. Don't you see that, Mr. Markin?"

"There's another side to it," argued the elder man. "If Mr. Houghton and Mrs. Stone was both set free to-morrow, gossip and laughin' at Mr. Stone wouldn't be the only thing that 'd happen. No, sir! Right off the bat, they'd go after the boss hot and heavy. His money wouldn't save him. They'd have him arrested for this, and, like as not, the judge that tried him would shut him up in a lunatic asylum. That's why he had the insurance contrivance put in. If anything was to happen to me—if I was to get sick, or break my darned neck—well, there'd be one first-chop burst of dynamite, that nobody would never hear, and that would be the end of the whole business."

"Then they're bound to stay here until Stone dies?"

"Looks that way."

"How old is Stone?"

"In his sixties—sixty-seven or sixty-eight, I guess. Maybe not so old as that, and maybe a year or two older."

"So there's no telling how long this thing will last. He may live another ten or fifteen years, or even twenty!"

"Easy. Mr. Stone's a smallish man, but he's what you'd call wiry. He has grand health, and he takes good care of himself. He always hires the best doctor he knows to travel around with him, like a rajah or a President."

Another pause, during which Markin's look once more sought the vine roof overhead, while Weatherbee, pulling at a fresh cigarette, studied his host.

"But, Mr. Markin," the younger man went on presently, "this business keeps you shut away in here precisely as if *you* were a prisoner—not to mention the servants. What about you?"

"It ain't the nicest job I ever had," Markin admitted. "No use sayin' that I like it. I don't. For all that this old hulk's got everything aboard her that could make a man reasonably comfortable, it's a dog's life."

"H-m!" A new thought had come to Weatherbee—a thought which was extremely disquieting. "Just like his two victims," he continued, "you will have to stay as long as Mr. Stone lives."

"Maybe he'll give me a vacation now and then."

"But what about *me?*"

Markin lowered his head and turned grave eyes upon the younger man.

"Mr. Weatherbee," he replied, "you know Mr. Stone's secret, don't you—same as me?"

"I do."

"I don't say you was huntin' the Tai-Lan. I'm pretty keen at judging people, and I believe you just happened in here. All the same, you're in the same boat as me. You can't help seeing that. You're aboard here, Mr. Weatherbee, and—you're aboard to stay."

(*To be continued in the December number of* MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE)

FLORA

Wake, little lute with golden frets!
  Come, aid me with your silver strings!
And shall we sing of violets
  Of bygone springs?

No? Not of tearful, sad regrets?
  Oh, then, of course, of happy things
Caught in the filmy, rainbowed nets
  Of Flora's wings!

What shall we choose from chords and scales?
  So hard to know just what is best!
We might reëcho nightingales
  In last year's nest.

So? Not of autumn's leaf-blown dales?
  Oh, then, of course, of birdling guest,
Where Flora's lulling breeze prevails
  In bower blest!

Let us rejoice—our theme is found!
  Come, let us witching art bestow
On this fond lay! Quite unrenowned
  Its dust will blow.

What? Not a song to go uncrowned?
  Oh, then, of course, where should it go
Save into Flora's blossom-bound
  Portfolio?

Clarence Urmy

Flood Tide at Shannon's Gut

WHERE THE TREACHEROUS WATERS SANG A SONG OF DEATH AND OF LOVE

By Leslie Gordon Barnard

WE traveled to the coast on the same train, and found ourselves sharing a claptrap conveyance over the ankle-deep sand road that leads, deviously enough, to Romsey. When he learned that I was heading for Captain Dalbro's, he laughed, pulled a newspaper clipping from his vest pocket, and read:

> "Clean and comfortable accommodation for one or two single gentlemen, overlooking the sea. Good home cooking. Excellent material locally for artists and writers. Apply Captain Thomas Dalbro, Romsey."

He stuffed the clipping back in his pocket, and removed his pipe from between his firm, white teeth.

"Which are you?" he grinned.

"A writer of sorts," I told him.

"Then I must be the artist," he said. "I'm glad of the confirmation. Even the chappies who daub in some magenta blobs for rocks and stand up a few sticks of burned trees against a salmon-pink sky can't quite see my stuff. Don't blame 'em altogether, but I thought that after a month of browsing in pastures new I might be found worthy to be hung in the autumn exhibition. Not that I give two crooked pennies for the alleged honor, but I have a fancy to buck the game. Hello, we must be getting there! Smell the sea and the rocks? Gad, that's good! Some viking strain in me, and all that, eh?"

We curved down a precipitous bit of road, and seemed literally to be thrown into the midst of a group of men, and a few women, lounging in front of what purported to be the "post office and general store," to which our driver also brought a bag of mail.

Our personalities seemed to be of interest, but our immediate needs were a matter of indifference.

"Dalbro's?" said one old fellow. "Why, sure—up top o' the cliff there."

He jerked his pipe vaguely.

"How do we get there?"

"Dunno—climb, I suppose, like the rest of us."

The crowd chose to be amused.

"Here's Nance Shannon coming," drawled a young fellow. "She's old Dalbro's adopted. Maybe you better ask her."

I fancied I intercepted a wink that passed around, but I forgot all else in the sudden interest of the new arrival. She approached with the free-limbed movement of an athlete. Though every eye was on her, and the stare of Neil Fryer was the appraisement of an artist forgetful of the conventions, she came with no revelation of hesitancy or embarrassment. We might not have existed.

There was no womanly pretension to her dress. Sufficient that it allowed liberty of movement; nor did the fact that freedom showed in the dressing of her hair detract from the effect. In the late afternoon sunlight it shone like burnished copper. The cream of the skin beneath it, the full-bosomed beauty of her, and the lithe gracefulness of her, set even my staid blood coursing.

"Gad!" said Neil Fryer.

Suddenly there were but two in the picture, for their eyes met, and we others had become but a background. His tall form topped hers by perhaps an inch or two as they faced each other, held, I believe, in a magnetic spell. Then she thrust past him, continuing her way to the post office.

Fryer was recalled to himself.

"Your pardon, Miss Shannon," he said quickly, uncovering; "but my friend here, and I, are anxious to find Captain Dalbro's and get our luggage up. If you would be good enough to direct us—"

He was quite boyish in the openness of his admiration. She gave him a moment's cold scrutiny, looking him over as only a scornful woman can, and entered the post office.

Fryer stood, cap in hand, staring foolishly after her. Then his face flushed darkly.

Suddenly the young fellow who was the witting author of this contretemps became unwisely guilty of a loud guffaw. The flush died from Neil Fryer's face. He turned, regarded the offender coldly, and asked very quietly in the hush that had fallen:

" Am I to understand that you are laughing at me?"

" What if I am?"

Fryer just leaned over and took the youth by the nose, forcing him to his feet. One of the women gave a little cry, but the men edged back readily to give room for the contest.

With a quick blasphemy, the young fellow struck at Fryer. It was pantherlike agility and strength against scientifically trained muscles. The fisherman was in a jersey, while Fryer's coat, which he had no time or thought to throw off, impeded him until it ripped. The post office cleared of its few occupants, all save Nance Shannon, who gave no evidence of interest. An unexpected blow caught the artist off his guard, staggering him, and the cruelty that is so easily evoked in men brought the chant from a hitherto silent audience:

" Kill him, Jack! Punish him good! Bash his face in for him, Jack Kittridge! He's your meat now, lad!"

Before Fryer could recover, the boy, thus encouraged, shot home another wicked blow, cutting his opponent's mouth badly; but before he could strike again, Nance Shannon appeared in the doorway.

" That's enough, Jack Kittridge!" she said, her eyes straight on him.

He hesitated; but once he met her gaze, it seemed that a hypnotic influence held him transfixed. He grinned confusedly, regarded his bloodied hands, and wiped them speculatively on his breeches.

Fryer got slowly to his feet, the back of his hand to his forehead. It seemed to take him a moment to get to the bottom of this respite; then he turned to the girl in the doorway.

" Look here!" he directed unsteadily. " You keep out of this! I don't need a woman to fight my battles for me!"

His gaze shifted to the crowd, and then to his opponent, who seemed to take new heart at this defiance of the girl; and they were at it again. In a matter of seconds it was over, and it was Jack Kittridge who was sullenly apologizing.

" It's all right, son," said Neil Fryer amiably. " Get up and hustle those bags up to Dalbro's. Mind those tennis rackets. Will you go along with him, Smardon? I'll get straightened up a bit," he went on, with a deliberate glance at the girl in the doorway. " Then this young lady can show me the way up when she's going."

Nance Shannon's lip curled.

" Unless she's—afraid!" added Fryer.

She bit her lip and went inside.

II

THE climb to Captain Dalbro's is a breakneck ascent. Sheer up the cliff, it seemed, we went.

" Better rest yourself, sir," said my guide, halfway up. He seemed to take his defeat in good part, and grinned through bloodied lips. " There's only one ever makes the trip without a stop, and that's *her.*" He grinned again. " Unless it be *him.* Lord, what a feller, and he looked easy enough in them city clothes! But he'll not beat *her*. Here's a good ledge, sir."

I was glad enough to comply, and for the first time to survey a scene that has ever since fascinated me. Below us, the slanting face of the cliff accommodated, on its various irregular ledges, a hotchpotch of cottages, for the most part vivid patches of color, toned with the green of trailing vines and infant gardens, cradled in rocky hollows to which—with infinite effort, surely—soil had been brought.

Still lower, in a curving sweep that comprehended perhaps half the crescent of the little cove forming the harbor, was a straggling line of spindly legged wharves, squat sheds, and fascinatingly ugly stores. I remember how peaceful it all looked, even to the mud flats, where the harboring craft of the fisher folk lay cozily bedded, canted over—the tide being out. Shannon's Gut, to eastward of the point whereon the lighthouse stands, lay shimmering in the sunshine, as deceitful as a painted woman, and as deadly.

" An odd entrance to the harbor, ain't it, sir?" my guide said, not without pride. " See how it turns there, sharp to the east like, with the island to shut it in, so there's hardly sea room for a decent-sized craft? You'll get a better view above. It takes a rare hand to navigate there, when the tide's a twistin' and a squirlin' in Shannon's Gut. Some day, sir, when his pipe's a drawin' well, you get Cap Dalbro to tell you the story about Shannon's Gut. Don't say I said so, but he'll have no one else tellin' it, though by rights it's a Kittridge story."

We went on up to where, straddling the cliff, stood the roomy cottage of the captain. He stumped to meet me genially, and introduced me both to my room, overlooking the sea, and to his daughter, Sylvia, who—for all that she made no impression such as Nance Shannon did—confirmed the idea that with such bait Dalbro might have drawn into his boarding net half the bachelors of the country, instead of merely two.

It was perhaps an hour later that the captain intruded on Sylvia's attempt to better our acquaintance by showing me the curios decorating the living room walls.

"T' other chap's coming up the path now," he said. "Nance is bringing him up here."

He strode to the window. The girl sprang to her feet and joined him.

"Where? Oh, I see them! He's—he's got her arm, dad!"

"Rum!" said Dalbro. "So he has! Well, well! Back with you, Sylvia—she mustn't know we're watching."

The captain's mutterings fell away, and—as if a common premonition had come to us—we all three stared at one another in an odd constraint of silence.

III

WAS ever so strange a comradeship as that between these two — Neil Fryer, the roving, impecunious artist, and Nance Shannon, adopted daughter of Captain Dalbro—for that was her status, though his name she would not take?

After the day when Fryer won a temporary mastery over her, she fled the very sight of him; but I caught her one day, when he was out, crouching—in one of the unconventional attitudes that seemed a part of her—before a chair in his room, staring at a picture he had set upon it. She jumped to her feet at my step, but she was too proud not to face me.

"You like his work?" I asked.

"Yes," she said curtly. "It's true to life."

After she had made her escape, I studied the picture. The rather harsh, radical treatment held a sudden revelation for me, for there was in it something of the sad, sweet wildness of the sea, and the mystery, the fear, and the wonder of it all were caught in the face of the fisher girl in the foreground. As I looked, I became aware that the face, though the features were unlike, was the face of Nance Shannon.

If my memory serves, it was that same night, or early the following morning, ere yet it was dawn, that I heard a commotion below stairs, the sound of a man's voice, and the strange wailing of a woman. Throwing on my dressing gown, I hurried out, and on the landing of the stairs I found Sylvia, shivering with cold and terror.

"It's Nance," she said. "She's been walking in her sleep again. Dad fetched her in, and she's crying down there."

Neil Fryer came out of his room just then, and she told him.

"Well, no need for you to get your death of cold over it," he said.

Sylvia seemed suddenly and becomingly conscious of being there in the immodesty of her nightwear.

"I am cold," she admitted; "and it does frighten me so, when she goes that way."

She looked up at Fryer with a look in the eyes of her that brought hard lines to his face. Then, suddenly, he swept her up in his arms, carried her to her room, and tucked her in, as if she were a child, and not a woman grown. He was back in an instant, joking about it, but there was a constraint in his voice as he muttered:

"Little fool!"

We hurried for our rooms at the sound of heavy steps on the stairs, and the voice of Nance Shannon protesting:

"I'm all right now, father!"

On the morrow, Fryer asked me to walk with him. I sat on the cliff edge while he painted, with strong, vigorous strokes, and kept up a rambling conversation.

"Smardon," he said presently, laying down his brushes, "there's something in your line I want you to do for me. There's a key to unlock the life of Nance Shannon, and I'm convinced that Dalbro holds it."

I did not tell him that I had already tried to get it. He resumed his work, then stopped again, and sought the horizon where sea and sky met, his lids narrowed.

" Funny kid, that!" he mused. " Yesterday I happened to be in the village when she came down. There were supplies to carry back, and, when I insisted, she couldn't very well refuse my aid. You know that alcove in the cliff, just as you turn to come up by that blatant green cottage? Well, there was a young lad in there, and a girl. He was making love to her with all the grace of a mastiff pup. You know how silly an overgrown man is when he gets a bit shy! Well, he put a tentative arm around her, and, as she did not repulse him, my laddie gets courage for a man-sized embrace. It all happened in a flash, and we were past, unobserved by them."

Fryer painted for a while again, leaning back to get the effect, and whistling through his teeth. Then he concluded:

" I looked at Nance, of course, to see if that would bring a smile; but her face was almost distorted—beautifully distorted, by gad! If I can remember it, it will go on canvas. She looked at me with a curl of her lip and a flash of her eye.

" ' Men are beasts!' she said.

" ' But even beasts,' I told her, ' may be tamed by those who are not afraid!'

" Gad, she's keen, Smardon! She shot back at me, still with that wonderfully curling lip:

" ' I'm going for a day's fishing on Thursday—alone. There's room for two in the boat!' "

Fryer laughed, and painted vigorously.

" Going?" I asked.

" Rather!" he said. " But she's running no chances with me—that way." He daubed again with amazing strokes. " I don't suppose," he added whimsically, " that she knows the old tale of the man who allowed a tame tiger to lick his hand."

That night I tried again to get the story of Shannon's Gut from Dalbro; but the captain's pipe couldn't have been drawing well, and I forbore to press the matter.

IV

Fryer's day of fishing with Nance Shannon must have been a mutually satisfactory experience, for they came up from the sea, side by side, with the step of equals and the talk of comrades. After that, though gradually, they became almost inseparable; but I, who remembered the little incident of Fryer's telling, noted that there was never for a moment any suggestion of man and woman, of other than a rigorously Platonic affair—never a touch of hand in hand, or even a taking of her arm over rough ways, as on that first day of all.

As for Sylvia, she sulked a little at first. Then, watching the clear-cut comradeship of it, she laughed a little scornfully, and busied herself more than ever about the tasks of the household—in which lay her forte, rather than in out-of-door occupations, perhaps because her shoulders had borne the burden since her mother's death two years ago. Once, however, I found her weeping over a pile of greasy dishes, to whose existence I am certain she was for the moment blind.

Our month was quickly up, and I determined to remain another with the spell of Romsey upon me.

" How about you, Fryer?" I asked laughingly, at the breakfast table.

" How about me, Nance?" he parried.

" I hope you can stay too, of course!" she said frankly.

Afterward I congratulated him, half jokingly, on the progress of his affair. He swung on me.

" Progress! And you a writer supposed to know something of psychology! My dear fellow, did you notice any—girlish confusion, or whatever you fellows would call it—or even any of her old resentment of me? No, sir! I fill a gap as a playmate; but affection, in the sense of love? Good life, Smardon, I'm nothing more to her than a pet codfish would be!"

He laughed, but he swung away from me for a long walk alone along the line of cliffs edging the coast.

It must have been about that time that I met Jack Kittridge and questioned him again regarding Shannon's Gut.

" This story you speak of must be common knowledge," I said.

" Ah, sir, so it is, but not a word will any one breathe that's like to reach his ears. They do say just after it happened —though I wasn't here then — the cap'n learns how they're talkin' a lot down the village—mostly Mart Smalley, who always had a loose tongue. The cap'n come down with his stick, sir, and Mart couldn't get about for weeks, and lost the best of the fishing. You'll not repeat me, sir?"

I went on up the breakneck steps of the cliff face, and so to the top, where Dalbro's house perched on a spot as level as your hand. Fryer had been busy for a day or two, measuring out and searching about for odd material—scantlings, netting, and what not. Now the thing was complete, and an improvised tennis court stood atop the cliff.

As I came up, he waved a triumphant hand, then continued his game. Nance was nowhere in sight. He was teaching young Sylvia Dalbro how to play tennis.

V

THAT night Nance Shannon walked in her sleep again. At about half past one I awoke, to find Neil Fryer in my room.

"There's something wrong," he said. "Nance has just come in. She's back in bed without waking. Sylvia says her father's gone. He heard Nance, followed her, as usual, and he hasn't come back. Get on your things!"

Sylvia appeared then, and clung timorously to Fryer's arm.

"Nance always goes to Shannon's Gut," she said, and shivered. "You know the path, Neil. Oh, hurry! The tide turned long ago, and with that wind—"

Fryer led the way. Across the headland upon which the Dalbro house stood, and which formed on the one side a portion of the harbor crescent, and on the other the sharp angle of Shannon's Gut, a single path led down a dangerous declivity to the sands below. Near the bottom a series of natural steps formed the only possible descent to or ascent from the beach.

By a curious freak of nature, the steps led into a rock formation shaped for all the world like a huge basin, perhaps thirty feet in diameter, seaweed-clad and slippery, and worn deep by the action of the waves and tides. At either side were notches, which caused the tide, when rushing up the gut, to fill the low-lying basin quickly, entering it in a spout of foam by the eastward notch, and spuming out in a suckling overflow at the other.

Making the descent with difficulty, torn at by the wind, and with the ominous sound of the tide in our ears in the windless intervals, we came upon a sight which, revealed by fitful moonlight, required infinite restraint to bear.

There, in the basin, with the water just comfortably up to his armpits, sat the captain, clawing at the slippery sides to offset the first gentle forerunners of the incoming tide, and cursing the ocean and all that therein was.

Do what he would, Neil Fryer burst into a peal of laughter that echoed weirdly from the rocks.

"Don't laugh, you fool!" stormed Dalbro. "I think I've broken my damn leg, and in five minutes this place 'll be a death trap! Lend a hand here, quick, and watch yourselves!"

We got him out, not without difficulty, and with infinite effort we aided him to scale the cliff. He was quivering like a leaf in a storm, but the sound of the first booming of the tide through the basin gave him a snarling strength. He shook his fist at the death trap below.

"Damn you!" he swore. "You'll not get me! You'll not get me—and you'll not get her!"

We carried him up, found his leg to be only badly sprained and lacerated, and put him to bed, with the face of him like that of a man who has seen death and found it hard to look upon.

VI

THREE days passed. The rising of the wind that night was the earnest of a gale that smote Romsey from the eastward, so that even within the harboring cove the vessels, bare-masted, sheltered in shivering apprehension, and, when the tidal influences were strong, rubbed against one another for company.

Dalbro lay on a couch where he could not see the sweep and fury of the storm, and watched in moody silence the spattering of great drops of rain against the casement window. Nance roamed outside, her wild nature exulting in the storm, but—though she lingered once or twice to give him opportunity—Neil Fryer made no attempt to join her. Once, when he called a half ironic good-by—interrupting some lively badinage in which he was indulging with Sylvia—she slammed the door in a way for which the wind could not account. I saw an exultant smile on Neil's face, for which I later took him to task.

"You're playing with fire—both ways," I protested.

"I've always been accused," he laughed, "of having a bit of the old Nick in me! Smardon, you writer chaps ought to know that there is jealousy in every woman, and that love itself is compounded half of it!"

Then his mood changed, and he stood ignoring me, staring out into the wildness of the storm.

The three days of storm being accomplished, there followed a day of calm, so sudden, so unexpected, so subdued, the atmosphere so hot, that it brought no sense of peace after tumult, but rather foreboding. The captain moved himself and his lounge and his still painful leg to the veranda, and lay there, cursing the heat. Sylvia and Neil Fryer alternated between tennis and cooling drinks, which he concocted with her aid, and of which Nance would not partake. As for Nance, she came and went like a restless spirit, and the eyes of the girl were burning orbs, like the blazing ball of the sun as it dipped into the western haze.

Sundown brought little respite. The sea lay leaden in its sweep; and yet we could tell, from the pounding of the breakers outside, that the aftermath of storm had brought a tremendous ground swell.

Night came on, and the dull pounding seemed to be nature's echo of one's own pulse. The moon rose out of the eastern sea beyond Shannon's Gut, and rode the sky like a dull counterpart of the flaming sun of day.

The captain called me to him. He lay inert on the lounge, and a sprawling shadow of Dutchman's pipe etched an odd pattern on him, leaving his face exposed and white as the face of a corpse.

"Confound that moonlight, Smardon!" he said testily. "It affects the sea—and those who dwell by it. Give this lounge a leg about, will you? Where's Nance? Fetch her to me, will you?"

He was querulous as a child, but I gladly humored him. I walked along the edge of the cliff, partly because the glamour of that dull, dead moonlight over the sea held me, partly because I fancied I had seen Nance Shannon pass that way.

There was a tropical spell over land and sea that heated the blood and left the skin without relief of moisture. A rank growth of grass flourished atop the cliff just here, and as I slowly approached the spot, I saw an object, like some wild creature crouching low.

My step must have been muffled by the grass, or she was so intent she did not hear me. She was lying full length, as might a child on a hearth, reading, her head raised on her elbows, her chin cupped in her hands; but her reading was of a little drama on the ledge some yards below.

A man and a girl sat there. Their low laughter reached us. He seemed to be bantering her, as Neil's custom was with Sylvia. Then, suddenly, he rose and stood, head flung back, his hair rumpled boyishly, his profile clearly defined against the growing silver of the sky. They faced each other for a moment—man and girl; then, as we watched, their figures seemed, as if impelled by a power beyond themselves, to move nearer and merge into one.

I stood transfixed, but the girl in the grass gave a low cry, part laugh, part sob.

"Beasts!" I heard her mutter fiercely. "All alike! And they call it love!"

She laughed again, more scornfully, and, jumping up, fled into the night.

VII

I RETRACED my steps more slowly.

"Nance just came in," Dalbro informed me. "I called, but she wouldn't come. Never mind—she's upstairs now. Come here—I want to talk to you. This damnable night has got my nerves on edge."

He smoked for a while in moody silence. Then he stirred uneasily, to say:

"You've asked me once or twice about Shannon's Gut here. I suppose you've just heard rumors, eh? Damned loose-tongued lot in the village! They just hinted, eh? Scared! I've got 'em scared of their tongues!"

He laughed rumblingly, but quickly on top of his laugh came his question:

"Are you afraid of death, Smardon?"

"No more nor less than most men. Why?"

"I suppose," he said, "it makes a difference, eh, just what's charged to a man's account in life? Don't look at me that way, Smardon! I'm thinking of Kittridge—Bill Kittridge. Romsey man—mate of mine. When I had the Sea Tramp—she was all her name implied—he shipped with me. Knocked around the world, handling any cargo that fell to our lot. We were loading on the Irish coast—Lough Swilly way—and were held up over a little cargo dispute. The Irish folk treated us white, and there were girls a plenty. Bill and I both had girls at home then, you understand, and we'd kept our distance of others.

"We were to clear at daybreak one morning, and the night before it was just such a night as this—damnable moonlight, and a soft, dead, sticky atmosphere that set a man boiling. Bill came aboard just before daybreak, and a woman with him to see him off—a slip of a thing with a shawl about her head, standing there, white-faced, in the dead, stillness of a sticky dawn. I can see her now, Smardon, just as she stood there and waved. I didn't question him, you understand — a man's doings ashore are his own affair; but we had a bit of wind in the run across, and Bill got done in by a falling spar. We buried him at sea. Four years later a woman came to Romsey, with a child of three, looking for a man called Shannon, who had shipped aboard the Sea Tramp, and whose child it was. I was at sea then, but they tell me when she learned that there was no Shannon in Romsey, and never had been, she stood still for a moment. She'd taken all this while to scrape up enough to come and see why he never wrote, as he promised, and why her letters were returned by the post office. She looked at the men standing there and staring at her, and she clasped the child to her breast and cried out aloud:

“ ‘ 'Tis a liar he was to me, and 'tis the beasts all men are!'

“ And then she fled from them. She had no money left, and there was the child, but some one gave her work, and she managed to make out after a fashion. People said her mind was going, Smardon. Then one day I came home from sea. No one told me, and I came on up here to my wife. That was before Sylvia was born. In the morning I went for a walk on the beach, before breakfast, and on the way back I met the woman and her child just at the foot of the cliff, by the basin there.”

The captain paused in his recital. He was sitting up now, breathing heavily, and the face of the man was full of horror.

“ Perhaps she—remembered—the skipper of the Sea Tramp; but whether her mind was gone, or what, she fled from me, leaving the child. I tried to warn her that the tide was rising, and at the Gut it comes in powerful fast; but she fled as if I were a ghost. I had to hurry to save the child. I bade the child call her, and she came back; but the tide was bad that day. Already the basin was full and spouting foam, and I had to hold the child in safety above it. I called to the woman to beware as she clambered recklessly up, but she lost her balance, and the basin took her. I was helpless there with the crying child. You know how the sea comes snorting up the gut, and pounces on the basin. Well, I saw her clawing, clawing at the slippery sides, sir, like a victim of a nightmare; and then a wave swept in, and she was gone!”

The captain's hands, talonlike, were stretched out as if to grasp the woman. Then he sank back and said dully:

“ It sucks them down and out, you know —the tide does when it races up the gut and through the basin.” After a pause, he added: “ I took the child in, but she's always been a wild thing, with no use at all for the men. When she grew to be a woman, and no man at all in her life, nor like to be, I thought maybe if she could meet more educated ones than our rough fellows here she might respond. I advertised, as you know. Damn that moonlight, Smardon! Shift me round a bit farther, will you?”

I obeyed.

“ What do you think of a man like that —to give his name as Shannon, and to make promises as false as the name to a woman who trusted him?”

“ A beast!” I said, remembering the word of Nance Shannon. “ But why did he let her know he hailed from Romsey?”

“ A slip of the tongue,” said Dalbro slowly, “ has ruined many a trickster. A man's never safe that way. His conscience, or something, makes him a babbling fool at times. Who's coming there?”

“ It's Neil and Sylvia, captain.”

“ Sylvia's a little idiot,” said Dalbro sharply. Then he laughed oddly. “ Her father's daughter,” he said, “ and as crazy for men as Nance is against 'em!”

He reverted to the old topic again.

“ They've called it Shannon's Gut ever since. The village, you understand, cross-questioned me, as skipper of the Sea Tramp, so that I had to tell the story. There was an inquiry, too, about the woman. D'ye know, it's got about since that her spirit haunts the gut? I figure it's Nance, walking in her sleep, and some one's seen her from the water. Good God, Smardon, why do I stay here? That basin's like a hungry mouth, trying to get her and me! There, leave me, Smardon, and forget my silly babbling. I've talked more than is good for me to-night!”

I sought out Fryer. He was sitting on the living room couch, his head in his hands. He looked up, and saw me.

“ Women are fools,” he said.

“ Yes,” I assented dryly; “ and they make still bigger fools of men!”

He read my knowledge in my eyes.

"You saw?" he said slowly.

"By accident. It's not fair to either of them to make love to both, Neil."

"Love, nothing! The little fool threw herself at me. Blame the night partly—oh, and myself, if you like! I've given her a straight lecture on life. Lesson in it for myself, too. How's the old boy?"

"Restless. He's worried over Nance."

"So am I. Look here, Smardon, tell the cap not to worry to-night. He's helpless, of course, with that game leg of his, but I've a notion to spend the night on the veranda, and he can bank on my looking after her if she does any of her sleepwalking stunts again. I don't feel like bed to-night."

I nodded, and, turning to go, fancied that the glowing eyes of Nance Shannon were staring out of the gloom. They vanished, and I laughed at myself for letting my imagination run riot on this night of deadly moon-flecked madness.

VIII

At two o'clock there was a little stir in nature. A faint breeze rippled its way inward with the coming tide, and sleep came to us in the Dalbro house on the cliff. Even Neil Fryer, smoking interminable cigarettes on the veranda, dozed in his chair, to awake after a time with a start. The details of the strange sequence of events I can only give from my own slight first-hand knowledge, and from a careful later gathering of the facts.

Fryer sat up with a little shiver, at the first touch of coolness following the almost tropical heat. Beyond the tennis court a figure moved slowly, with the mechanical movements of a sleepwalker. Fryer blinked himself fully awake to the reality of the apparition, drew on his discarded shoes, and followed.

Almost as if conscious of this self-appointed guardianship, Nance quickened her steps. As always, she headed directly for the precipitous descent to the basin, and her figure disappeared over the brow of the cliff. By the time Fryer reached this point, she had climbed down, with great agility, to the basin below.

He followed with all possible caution, lest he should disturb her harmfully. The dull pounding of the surf outside the island mingled with the singular sound that gave individuality to the gut—the voice of the tide, not lapping its way quietly in, but coming with an ominous, warning monotone and a recurrent roar, as if the undertow sang its deadly song and each successive wave the chorus.

She stood on the beach now, dead white as it was in the moonlight. She was dressed in some stuff that appeared black. As she stood, she raised her arms, outstretching them toward the gut that took her mother; and the shadows weirdly kept pace with her.

At first Neil Fryer stood transfixed. Then, to his amazement, she turned and held out her arms, as if she saw him and welcomed him. Overcome with the sight, his pulses racing, he went to her upon the sand.

Behind them the first wave found its way into the basin, and a second one, spouting feebly through the eastward notch, sucked its way out, with a rattle in the throat of the western one. Neil tried to get behind the girl, that he might gently urge her back to safety; but she retreated farther along the beach. In sudden desperation he took her arm. It was firm and cold to his grasp, but she did not shrink, as was her wont, from the contact on her bare flesh.

Then it was that the passions of the night possessed the man, and he forgot everything but that she was there, as beautiful as the night and as alluring. He took her in his arms, and she lay passive while he kissed her again and again; but suddenly her form became rigid in his embrace, and she leaped from him, turning upon him fiercely.

"Men are beasts!" she flashed. "Even you! To-night—first with *her*—and now with *me!*"

"Nance!" he cried appealingly.

She laughed, and the curl of her lip was there again.

"No sleepwalker to-night, Neil Fryer," she told him. "The night you keep watch, Nance Shannon stays awake. You thought I didn't hear you say that you would? So easily fooled, Neil Fryer? And you promised to look after me, didn't you? Thanks, but Nance Shannon can take care of herself!" She glanced behind her. "If she cares to!" she added hissingly.

He turned his thoughts from her at that, and drew a quick breath of alarm. She laughed again oddly. The rattle in the throat of the western notch had ceased now. It was sucking through and spuming out too great a flood for that.

"What does it matter?" she said. "My mother went this way. And you? One less of you in the world to trouble women! You think I'm mad, Neil Fryer. Well, not that way. You came into my life, forcing your way where you were not wanted. No, keep away—or run, if you care so much for your life! You deceived me into thinking you were not as other men, with their loves; and then you left me for *her*. I hate you, Neil Fryer! I hate myself for ever listening to you!"

"Nance! Nance!" he cried. "Come! We must go at once!"

"Are you so afraid of death?"

"No, but I want life, Nance, for you—with you—"

"My mother went this way. Hers was the only love I ever knew. A mother's love is true, but men's is only passion! No! Keep away, I tell you, Neil Fryer, for you could hardly save yourself now, and if you lay finger on me I shall fight. Go, now, if you will. You're strong, and there may be still a fighting chance."

"And you?"

"My mother went this way."

He strode to her and took her arm firmly. She did not redeem her promise to struggle, for he smiled at her now, and there was tenderness, I fancy, in his eyes.

"You mad, wild, Irish thing!" he said softly. "It's too late now, Nance. There's only death in the basin, and there's not a foothold in the cliff elsewhere. I've often wondered how death would come to me at last. I've faced it before, but never so well as now. Nance, look at me! You've been a rare comrade while it lasted—but it's love I wanted. Passion, you say—just passion? Listen, Nance Shannon! There's five minutes at least left us. Though you are strong, I am a man, and stronger. I could have my way with you and take the sweetness of it while it lasts; but there's more than passion to the love of a man—when it is love. It shall be as you say, whether I kiss you, Nance dear, before we go!"

The strip of beach grew less. Behind them the basin was a foaming mass, a certain death trap now. In Shannon's Gut the tide runs fast. He looked at her.

"It's cowardly to wait for it by inches," he said. "Shall we go and meet it, Nance Shannon?"

She looked at the awesome surge of the tidal water, with the declining moon eerily upon it. Then she straightened, turned to him, and nodded. He took her hand, as he might a child's whom he was to lead through a dangerous place.

She drew him to her.

"Kiss me first!" she said, and lifted her face to the man.

IX

I STOOD on the beach by Shannon's Gut at the dawn of the day, and in the slack of the tide and the gleam of the sunlight it shimmered—quiet, beautiful, deceitful as a painted woman. In the basin a two-foot depth of water lay, and some small fishes played at tag in temporary captivity. Beyond the gut, the rocky island that helps to shape its treacherous length rose in its gray barrenness.

It seemed the memory of a horrid dream, yet not completely horrid, to think of the thing I had seen two hours before, when, from the cliff top, wakened by Sylvia to the fact that Nance had gone, I hurried out to find the tide in flood at Shannon's Gut.

Dalbro stood beside me now, suffering the torturing aftermath of the descent, and forgetting it in his agony of spirit.

"Tell me it again," he pleaded. "They stood just here, you say?"

"Just here, as near as I can judge from watching from above."

"Aye, aye—and then they started out to meet it, hand in hand, and stopped, and, coming back—"

"They kissed, and so embraced until the water swirled about their feet."

"Aye! And then, you say, they divested themselves of most of their clothes?"

I nodded, and the picture came strongly to mind.

"They stood like two young Olympians, half naked in the moonlight. Then, hand in hand, they went in to meet the rising tide."

Dalbro seated himself heavily on the slippery edge of the basin, and covered his face with his hands.

"My daughter—Nance!" I heard him say.

Boats tardily searched the gut, where last night there were none when needed most. The captain looked up, and saw me watching them.

"No use!" he said dully. "Shannon's Gut does not return its dead. It sucked *her* out. We never found *her*."

At noon they gave up the search.

At sundown it was that old man Kittridge, grandfather of young Jack, came in from a solitary time of fishing, as was his wont now that his dotage made him querulous in any but his own company. He reported that he had seen what must have been a manifestation of the Kittridge spirit on the island yonder, in the dying light of day.

They told him about Nance.

"'Twas the girl and her mother, then," he affirmed. "Come to think on it, there were two of 'em—for I glimpsed 'em white and stark as you please."

Few paid much attention to this news, for was not the old man failing both in sight and in mind, and filling the vacancy with increased imagination? But young Jack Kittridge hurried up with word of it.

The captain had sunk into a lethargy, from which even this rumor could not rouse him.

"It was right," said the lad, turning to me, and full of the pride of it; "it was right for a Kittridge to see the Kittridge spirits. Others searched the island, didn't they? But they saw nothin'!"

At that the captain raised himself, and pointed a finger at the bearer of the news.

"Kittridge spirits—nonsense!" he cried, with a flare in his eyes. "My woman and my daughter, I tell you—flesh of my flesh! Only a Dalbro could face the flood like that. It skipped a generation, the spirit of the Dalbros, but it's there, in her. Go tell the village, Jack Kittridge, that if I take the pride I'll bear the shame. Your uncle's memory bore it long enough, for we buried Bill Kittridge at sea with no shame upon him save what I put from my own shoulders, that he might carry it to the depths with him. Go away—leave me!"

Open-mouthed, Jack Kittridge stared at the man. Then, recovering from his first dismay, he fled, so that if the pride of this romantic scandal was to leave the house of Kittridge forever, he would personally salvage the pride of telling the news.

As for me, I did not break in upon Dalbro's mood. He said, at last, calling me to him:

"Did he say something about her—her spirit being seen again? Well, that's always been the story. Old man Kittridge is in his dotage, and yet—she was Irish, lad. She believed in things when I met her first up Lough Swilly way—in fairies, and spirits, and—men."

I said nothing, for my thought was rather with Nance than with the mother of Nance. It pleased me to think that the island could conceal more than ghosts, if they chose not to be seen in the light of day. I also thought that when night fell fully over Shannon's Gut, I might borrow a boat and risk the passage.

It was under covering of night that I ferried two cold, exultant spirits back across the Styx. I asked them how, when men declared no one could swim Shannon's Gut in time of flood, the crossing had been made.

"No one in Romsey," said the woman proudly, "until a man came!"

He shook his head at that, smiling whimsically. Gratefully he accepted a cigarette with fingers that were not quite steady.

"You can lay it all, Smardon," he said, "to the lips of a woman!"

It was from those lips, because of the rightful pride in the heart of her, that I learned, months after, the full story of those few last moments on the beach.

So we came in safety to the curiously formed rock basin where a mother and her daughter both met their destinies. I left the young Olympians to make the steep ascent together, while I sought the harbor with my borrowed craft, ere yet the treacherous tide sang its song of death up Shannon's Gut.

A GLEAM

Where the wind has smitten the ocean's breast,
  Through a rift of cloud,
  Like a torn gray shroud,
Comes a gleam of gold from the west.

It wanes on the water bleak and cold,
  Like the transient gleam
  Of love's bright dream
In a tragedy deep and old.

William Hamilton Hayne

The Buried Treasure

THE RICH LEGACY THAT HENRY SOMERS BEQUEATHED TO HIS MOST HATED ENEMY

By Howard Erickson

AN old man, bent and frail, in a tattered felt hat and work-worn clothes, stumbled along in the sparse oats. He leaned heavily on a maple stick clenched in a gnarled hand. Out of a gray face, deep-sunken eyes peered over the fields.

It was a day of mirages. Distant scenes and objects loomed near at hand in the blue haze of a country morning. Shiny windmill towers and the red or white of farm buildings seemed to leap out of their vernal groves miles and miles away.

Henry Somers paused, and his eyes rested bitterly on the farmstead nearest in his vision. It stood amid the smiling green of fields and trees beside the highroad. With an envenomed light, those eyes roved from the prosperous home of Dan Griffith across his land, over a wide pasture bellied by a creek of flowing water, where tranquil cattle grazed. They swept along his neighbor's thriving grain to a black expanse faintly crisscrossed with green lines of rising corn. They lingered with a strange intensity upon a narrow strip of the cornfield beside the fence that marked the boundary between Griffith's rich farm and his own unfruitful ground.

Just across the fence from Somers was a tree that he had planted years and years ago, and underneath its branches was a stone he had placed there in the days of his youth and strength. Many and many a time he had sat beneath that tree when it was his; and often, since then, Griffith had sat there in Somers's sight, as if in very spite of him.

The long fingers clutched the stick as the old farmer noted, on Griffith's land, a team of horses drawing a cultivator, with a husky young man bent over the sagging handles. Close behind swaggered a stout figure with a slight, girlish form at its side. The man with the cultivator drove on toward the boundary fence, and the two behind him paused amid the green of the corn. Somers's jaundiced eyes centered on the bulk of Griffith with a glare of hate, then roved again along the strip.

That piece of land had been his own, from the time when he came to the country until his avaricious neighbor stole it.

Griffith's farm included the northwest quarter of this section. Somers's eighty paralleled it to the east. There always had been some question about the boundary between the properties, for the stake marking the half section corner at the roadside had been lost. Then, one day, Griffith discovered the missing marker buried a dozen rods on Somers's side of the old corner. He proceeded to erect a fence from this point to the southern end of the old line, and thenceforth it was the boundary. It gave Griffith a triangular strip of half a dozen acres at the expense of Somers.

In his heart, the latter did not recognize this new line, for actual measurement of the two farms had long ago established that he had no more than his own; but he respected the fact of the other man's possession. He had thought of destroying the fence some night, or of going to law about the matter, but he never did either. Instead, he submitted to the robbery, and saw his land, with the spreading maple and the stone beneath its boughs, pass into the hands of Griffith.

From that time a hatred for his neighbor gnawed Somers's heart—a hatred fanned by the other's contemptuous, insulting manner. When they met alone at their farm border, or in the homes of neighbors, around threshing machines, at church, or in the stores and streets of their market town, Griffith taunted and bullied him.

Once, when Somers, in anger, scourged Griffith's cattle from his corn, the infuriated owner, who was in his own field near by, ran to him in a rage, tore the lash from his hands, and gave him a terrific whipping.

But, more than the stinging memory of insolence and blows, Somers treasured the bitterness of his stolen land. That strip was the best of his farm, for most of his remaining ground was swampy, and he could till but little of it with profit.

To-day he stood, poking aimlessly in the straggly oats, and watched his neighbor cross the cornfield. Griffith came on toward the tree, turning about once or twice to wave his hand at a girl who was strolling in the opposite direction, fluttering her sunbonnet in affectionate adieu.

As Griffith drew near, he shouted boisterously at Somers. He prided himself on being hearty with people, generally laughing and talking in great good humor, though occasionally he would pass them in surly quiet, with hardly a nod or recognizing glance. Secure in his self-love, he did not feel that he had to exert himself to be polite to others unless it was his whim.

Never did Somers see his enemy but venom filled him; and so it did to-day, as the big man yelled with careless joviality:

" Hey, Henry! Come over here."

Griffith sat down with a sigh of fatigue on the stone, and crossed one pudgy leg over the other. He was dressed like a prosperous " gentleman farmer," with a " Sunday suit," a soft shirt, a white collar, and a tie. He held the stump of a dead cigar in the corner of his mouth.

The elder man strode to the fence, his eyes fixed in a kind of fascination on the florid face with the thick red nose poised over the puffy brown mustache. Griffith's small, hard eyes smiled out upon his wide green land. They strayed over the crisscross of corn with a vast satisfaction, and roved contemptuously to the flat, poorly improved farm of Somers.

" Hell of a place you got!" he commented, without taking the cigar from his lips. " Wouldn't have it if you'd give it to me!"

" Don't see why you don't want it," returned Somers, his face aflame with rage and wounded pride, his eyes not meeting Griffith's, but fixed on the flowing chain strung across the wide stomach. " You don't seem to mind having my land there " —indicating the strip.

Griffith laughed loudly.

" I took what I wanted," he said.

This gibe somehow got under Somers's skin more than anything he had ever endured at his neighbor's hands.

For a moment there was silence.

" Kind of funny about Hans," suddenly said Griffith.

" Funny, how?" returned the old man, a tremor running through him, for there was a sinister note in the other's voice.

II

Hans Jorgensen was an old man who had worked about on neighboring farms for many years, drinking up in winter what he earned in summer. A year or so ago he had gone to the old country, to claim a fortune which he said had been left him there. Early the last winter he returned, shabby and drunken, with the same old trunk that he had taken with him, carrying it on his shoulder from the railroad station, as he had borne it thither when going away. He shrugged his shoulders when people jokingly asked him about his inheritance.

Uninvited, he stopped to visit Somers, and stayed the entire winter. He did no work, and paid nothing for board and lodging, despite broad hints from his grudging host. He ate and loafed and drank, apparently having a little money, for every month or so he would offer a new twenty-dollar bill at the bootlegging drug store.

One night, in the midst of a spree, he died in the haymow where he slept. It was supposed that he had taken a drink of liniment, which contained carbolic acid, evidently mistaking the bottle for his whisky flask, which he kept on the " horse medicine " shelf in the barn.

They found in his clothes only the change from a recently broken twenty-dollar note. Search of his trunk revealed no money.

Few felt grief at his passing, Somers least of all. The old farmer's principal emotion was relief. He soon forgot Jorgensen. Indeed, he had hardly thought of the man for weeks, until this disturbing mention.

" What do you mean, funny about Hans?" he questioned again, as his neighbor stared out over the green fields, silent, drawing on his dead cigar.

At last Griffith took the stump from his mouth, and, turning to Somers, said:

" Well, it's kind of funny he drank that stuff. Looks like somebody got a notion old Hans had a lot of money, and put the carbolic acid alongside his booze."

Somers's face went pasty white as the hard little eyes smiled into his. He felt a cold sweat standing out over his body.

"I just got to thinking about it the other day," the speaker went on, his eyes still smiling. "You know Hans used to talk about an inheritance in the old country, and he seemed to have plenty of money to buy booze when he came back, the way he used to flash a twenty-dollar bill every once in a while. Probably he had a fortune in that old trunk of his, and somebody got wise to it—got Hans out of the way and took the money."

"Well, you haven't heard of anybody who got rich around here suddenly, have you?" demanded Somers, in a nervous attempt at defiance.

With a short laugh, Griffith rose.

"Nobody's going to be fool enough to advertise that they got Hans's money until he's been dead quite a spell. Say, Henry," added the big man, a taunting gleam in his smiling eyes, "I guess I'll come over and see you one of these days. I've been thinking of it lately."

He walked away, while Somers went home in a panic, his head full of Griffith's terrifying innuendo. Did his neighbor suspect him of killing and robbing Hans? Or was he just pretending suspicion to frighten Somers?

In a daze, the old farmer took a hoe and returned to the oat field, to chop out mustard weeds. Automatically he slashed at the yellow parasites, his mind fixed on Hans Jorgensen.

What if Griffith was right about the fellow's having money? He thought of those new twenty-dollar notes. It would be just like Hans, if he had got his fortune, to tell nobody. Probably he had the money changed, in New York, into big bills that would be easy to carry and keep concealed. Just like him, too, the stingy old devil, to hog every bit of it to himself, sponging on other people, just as he did when he was poor, spending nothing except for whisky, not even offering a drink of that to anybody else!

If Hans had money, it was somewhere around here, hidden about the buildings or buried in the ground. It would be easy to find, and it would belong to Somers. Jorgensen was gone, and had left it to him, though without intention. Yes, the money would be his, for it was on his place.

He went on chopping mustard weeds, but sometimes his hoe tore out whole roots of grain, so obsessed was he by the thought of the fortune. It must be a lot of money! Hans had once said that he would inherit about thirty thousand dollars.

In rapt imagining Somers dug his hands into a fluffy, velvety pile of bank notes, feasting his eyes on their dazzling luster. After a lifetime of poverty, he would be rich. He was old, but not too old to get enjoyment out of wealth.

He stared in abstraction over the green fields across the shining fence, and his gaze encountered a bulky figure swaggering about in Griffith's corn. A terrible fear wrenched his heart at sight of that man, a nausea of disappointment. He recalled his neighbor's ominous words a few hours before—words of diabolical insinuation. He could not claim the money if he found it, for Griffith would tell everybody of his suspicion, and the countryside would believe that Somers had brought about Jorgensen's death to get his fortune. Even if he told about the treasure and did not claim it, who would hold him guiltless of the blood of Hans?

He thought of making no search for the money, leaving it wherever Jorgensen had concealed it; but there was Griffith again. His covetous neighbor, already on the scent, would never rest until it had been discovered. For where could Jorgensen have hidden it, where could he himself hide it, that this man would not seek it out and find it? With a sinking heart he recalled Griffith's threat to visit him.

Suddenly Somers laughed aloud. Of course, Jorgensen never had any fortune.

Then fear gripped him again. If there wasn't any treasure, it would make no difference to him. Griffith would insist that there was, and that Somers had made away with it and Hans.

Instead of a blessing, this money was a curse—a curse, though it did not exist. If he could only turn this curse against his enemy!

Buffeted about by his fears and passions, old Somers worked on long past noon. Hunger finally recalled his sense of time, and he left the field.

Stamping past his unpainted shack, he entered the barn to feed the horses. Gripping the rungs with tense hands, he climbed the ladder to the haymow. With a quick, uneasy glance at the corner where Jorgensen's blanket still remained, he picked up a pitchfork and walked to where half a ton of musty hay was piled against the farther wall. He paused with his fork poised in air, his eyes roving from the hay to old Jorgensen's blanket, and back to the hay again.

III

A FEW nights later Somers was sitting beside his cold, empty stove in the kitchen, looking out of the window into a twilight of dripping rain. He sat on in the darkness, while the rain came down more heavily—sat there with a strange light in his weary, bitter eyes, a terrible smile on his face.

Half an hour later, a man came down the ladder of Somers's barn with old Jorgensen's blanket rolled up in a bundle and clutched tightly under an arm. He stepped nervously into the drenching downpour, peered cautiously about like a thief, flung a spade across his shoulder, and strode into the night and flood, a bent and sinister figure.

Late the next day, when the cold, bedraggled clouds were driving across the sky after a torrent of rain had deluged the earth, Axel Jacobsen set out for Somers's place, to return a sledge hammer that he had borrowed. This Jacobsen was a young blond giant who lived with his sister on the next farm to the south. He had work to do at home, and he knew that Somers had no immediate need of the sledge, but he had promised to bring it back that afternoon. Somebody had once spoken about his being a man of his word, and thenceforth Jacobsen took great pains to live up to the praise, making a virtue of always keeping his promise, even in trifles, where nobody cared whether he did or not.

As he waded through the water to Somers's door, he heard a groan within the house. He shoved the door open and saw the old man doubled up on the bed, in rain-soaked clothes and muddy boots. Somers's features were distorted with pain.

" I brought back the sledge," announced the visitor. " I told you I would bring it back this afternoon."

Feverishly Somers stared into the dull blue eyes of his beef-faced neighbor.

" I got caught in the rain last night," he whispered. " My rheumatism is so bad I couldn't get up."

Jacobsen, a youth of few words and little curiosity, asked no questions, but began to boil some coffee and prepare food for Somers, who ate and drank with difficulty. Then the young man went out to care for the stock.

He returned to find Somers sitting on the side of the bed, his hands shaking, his face ghastly. Jacobsen grunted impatiently as the other quavered:

" You are mighty good to me—always have been. I guess I ain't got long to live, and I'd like to leave my property to you; only, you see—"

The beef-faced youth silenced him with a gruff—

" Get back to bed and don't talk. I'll come and see you to-night," he added as Somers lay down on the rough couch. " I'm going home to call up the doctor."

" I wish you would tell Griffith to stop in," requested the sick man.

Jacobsen nodded. From his house he telephoned to the physician and Griffith.

Returning to Somers's place, he found his portly neighbor sitting on the trunk beside the bed. Griffith was joking and laughing, all affability and sympathy, a brandy bottle in one hand, while with the other he was holding a tablespoonful of the liquor to Somers's blue lips.

The man with the bottle scowled blackly as Jacobsen opened the door, but he did not vent his displeasure in words. Once when Jacobsen shut a prowling horse of Griffith's in his yard, to hold until the damage it had done to a cornfield had been paid for, the animal's owner raced after it in a fury, cut the fence wires, and started to drive it off. Jacobsen went to his house, got his shotgun, and chased his neighbor all the way home, firing charges of birdshot into his legs. Griffith still carried some of the shot there. After that episode, he had always treated the young man politely.

Each evening, now, Jacobsen could see him stalking across the fields to visit Somers, sometimes stopping to rest beneath the maple tree near the farm boundary. Several times he noted his wide-stomached neighbor in the Somers barns and sheds, taking care of the stock, saw him emerging from the storm cave, or observed him busy about the house, putting it in order.

" My, but you are good to me!" sighed Somers, as Griffith poured him out a tablespoonful of brandy on the third of these calls. " We haven't always been friends, either."

"Christ tells us to forgive," was the response.

"I want to tell you about the property. I haven't any relatives to leave it to," said Somers, his feverish eyes bright, the shadow of a hideous smile on his wasted face.

"Yes, yes, Henry," encouraged Griffith.

This was the first time he had brought the sick man so near the point, though he had hinted broadly about the money he suspected Somers to have stolen.

"I had a lawyer come out with the doctor this afternoon," went on Somers, "and I made my will. I am going to leave you my farm."

He paused, as if choking, while the visitor leaned forward, triumphant cupidity in the hard, smiling eyes. He had got around the flabby fool by jollying him, as he knew he would! He hadn't even found it necessary to suggest the will. He didn't care so much about the land, though that was something. It was old Hans Jorgensen's money that he wanted.

He listened for information about the treasure. Looking into the burning eyes of the man on the bed, he could see that it was coming.

"I got Hans's money," whispered the old farmer.

"Did you kill him?"

"No—he took the carbolic acid by mistake; but later I found the money in the barn, hidden in an old felt boot in the hay."

"How much?"

"About thirty thousand dollars."

"In twenty-dollar bills?"

"Some twenties, but mostly hundreds," replied Somers, a vague smile flitting across his face. "All wrapped in little bundles, with heavy rubber bands around them—soft, shiny, yellow bills!"

"How do you know there was thirty thousand dollars?" demanded Griffith, glancing stealthily over his shoulder. "Did you count it?"

Somers nodded.

"Is it still there—in the barn?" whispered Griffith, his face bent over the blue lips.

"No—I took and hid it somewhere else."

"Where?"

Somers did not answer. His eyes closed. He was caught in a fit of choking. The distracted Griffith, in his fear, could almost hear the death rattle. He shook the sick man roughly.

"Henry, where did you put it?"

The door opened, and Jacobsen's blank face appeared.

"He's pretty near gone," mumbled Griffith, rising and stepping back from the bed.

He stood for a moment gazing at the yellow, cadaverous face. Then he stepped outside to the pump, for a drink of water. His pulses pounded with exultation, and he could hardly keep from whistling with excess of joy. That thirty thousand dollars was his already! He could get the old imbecile, before he died, to tell him where it was. Anyhow, it wouldn't take him long to find it.

Meantime Jacobsen sat down on the side of the Somers's bed. The old man's eyes opened, and he said in a husky voice:

"Jacobsen, I am leaving my farm to Griffith. I was going to let you have it, but he's been awful good to me lately."

Jacobsen shrugged his indifference.

"Hell, I've got more land now than I can afford! Why should I want yours? I'm not raising frogs!"

"Say, Jacobsen," went on Somers, his voice coming in little gasps, "I want you to promise me something." He paused, and whispered: "Is he gone?"

Jacobsen nodded.

"He's outside."

Somers's hand crept into the pocket of his shirt, and drew forth a crumpled letter, which he held out to the young man.

"I want you to promise me to give this letter to Griffith when he comes to die," he panted.

"I may not be around where he is then," grumbled Jacobsen, who, though he prided himself on keeping promises, was reluctant to make them.

"Promise to give it to him if you are around where he is," begged old Somers, still holding out the letter in his withered hand. "Give it to him when he comes to die, and not till then."

"I'll give it to him if I'm anywhere around," agreed Jacobsen, without enthusiasm, taking the missive and putting it in his pocket.

"I wouldn't trust it to anybody else but you," continued Somers, struggling for breath. "They would read it, but I know you won't, because you always mind your own business, just like you always keep your word."

Jacobsen's dull eyes shone with flattered pride.

Griffith reëntered the room, saw Somers conscious and speaking, and hurried over to him. Jacobsen rose to his feet and went outside.

Griffith knelt beside the bed, as if in prayer, and seizing a shoulder of the man on the bed, shook it violently, whispering hoarsely:

" Where did you hide Hans's fortune?"

" On my land," came the answer.

The greed-crazed creature above him shook the wasted frame still more fiercely, but the trembling lips spoke no words, though the bitter eyes blazed into Griffith's with a consuming flame.

IV

Somers died without telling the hiding place of the fortune.

Taking immediate possession of the place as executor, Griffith scarcely waited until the old man was cold in his grave before beginning his search. He went through the house from cellar to shingles. He ransacked every nook and corner of the other buildings, tearing up the floors and excavating under them. He explored the storm cave, and burrowed about in the most likely places in the grove. Nearly every evening and most of his Sundays he spent thus, spade in hand.

He did not find the money.

Though disappointed, he was not discouraged. If he did not discover it at first, he would come upon it later.

As Jacobsen watched his neighbor digging, he thought of the letter that Somers gave him, and wondered if it had anything to do with the treasure that Griffith was hunting. But what if it had? Somers had intrusted it to him as a man who minded his own business, and who never broke his word, to keep unopened until he could deliver it, if he was anywhere around, to Griffith when he came to die.

Of course, if he believed in the story of the buried money, he would have been tempted to read the letter, with the idea that it might tell where the money was, and might enable him to get it from under Dan Griffith's nose; but Jacobsen didn't believe the foolish story. If there had been any treasure, Somers would have told him; so he let the missive lie undisturbed in the trunk where he had placed it on the day when the old man gave it into his hands.

Griffith didn't say much about the object of his quest, but he let it be known that money brought from the old country was hidden somewhere on the farm Somers had left him. Some people scoffed, declaring that he was crazy, but most took the view that he knew what he was about.

" Griffith is no fool," ran their comment. " He'll find what he is looking for."

" Smart fellow, to get Somers to leave him his property!"

" He wouldn't take all the trouble he did with the old crank just for his no-good farm."

The neighbors volunteered to help, but Griffith roared refusal of all their offers. He did not even call upon his son or his hired men, doing it all by himself—the first sustained, heavy labor he had performed in years. He trusted nobody, and he could not bear to have any one but himself unearth the money.

He dug on in his odd hours, through the summer and fall, heedless of the calluses on his hands and the aches in his stooped back and shoulders, indifferent to the scorn or curious approval of his fellows. Undismayed by finding nothing, he dug on and on with unfaltering persistence. Even when the ground froze over, he did not stop, but broke the surface with a pick, for the spade to follow. He kept on until the earth was frozen solid for a depth of several feet, and the snow was piled over the land for the long, hard winter.

In the spring he began again. He no longer contented himself with the fag ends of the day or week. More and more he devoted his whole energies to delving for the treasure, putting in whole days at a time, and working until late in the night.

He was digging in the fields now, having covered every foot about the grove and buildings.

Sentiment had changed. People who had said " Dan Griffith knows what he's doing," now shared the belief that he was losing his mind. His wife, always a sickly, flighty creature, begged him to abandon this wild-goose chase and attend to his neglected farm. His son and daughter, enthusiastic at first and later indulgent, grew disgusted and alarmed.

Influenced by public opinion, and somewhat disheartened, too, by continued failure, Griffith gave up the search. Perhaps everybody was right, and old Somers had been crazy. He went back to farming, immersed himself in work, and stuck to it heroically for days, weeks, months.

His family and neighbors believed his insane obsession gone; but always in the corner of his brain dwelled the idea of the hidden fortune. Greed, the ruling passion of his nature, drove the possessed man back to the vision of the buried money.

One autumn morning he hitched his horses to the plow. He knew he should go to work on his home land, but something impelled him to direct his course toward the Somers farm. In imagination, he saw the glittering share uprolling a golden stream of shining bank notes. He felt the velvety softness of the yellow bills in his quivering hands.

At noon he did not return, and his disturbed wife sent her daughter to look for him. The girl found the plow and horses standing in the stubble, while the driver was spading up the ground, his face set, in his eyes a feverish intensity.

So Griffith resumed his hunt for the money—resumed it in spite of pleas and tears and ridicule, giving all his time to the overmastering task.

Day by day he delved across the land, without unearthing any trace of old Somers's buried thousands. How could he waver, when perhaps just a few feet from his spade lay the alluring treasure?

At times he would lose heart and abandon his futile efforts, as he had abandoned them before, struggling desperately to center his attention on the neglected work of his farm; but, like the incurable addict of a drug, he would stumble back into temptation. His impulses to reform grew weaker and more infrequent. His periods of abstinence from treasure seeking became shorter and farther apart.

Time passed, days, weeks, months, and years flew by, and Griffith forgot everything but the lure of the buried money. His property, his land and buildings, without management or care, were going to the devil. The fields, half tilled and full of weeds, grew more barren year by year.

Hired men shunned or left his employ. His son, overworked, with no one to advise or help him, slunk away more and more frequently to town, drinking and carousing. Griffith's wife, a nervous wreck, did not leave her bed. His daughter, dearer to him than wife or son, was eating out her heart in bitterness. The young man she was to have married had jilted her, convinced that her father's wealth was crumbling with his mind.

Griffith himself, bent, shabby, frowzy, dirty, his eyes haunted by frenzy, dug on and on, not even returning to his home at night. He slept in the old shanty, now a rat-infested ruin, cooking and eating his meals in miserable seclusion, digging, ever digging, day in and out.

Impatient at his slow progress, he pleaded with his son, his hired men, and his neighbors to help him; but they would not—none of them save Jacobsen, who now and then, when he had nothing to do at home, would come to dig with Griffith, who paid him for his work.

And so, alone or with Jacobsen, Griffith plied his spade up and down old Somers's land.

Even in winter, when he could not dig because of the frozen earth and the mighty banks of snow, he did not rest. He paced the floor by day, scheming out a way to locate the fortune, while at night he often sat smoking on the edge of the bed in sleepless calculation.

Each spring he resumed his furious quest, frequently retracing his excavating course in fear lest he might have overlooked a foot of soil. Half a dozen times he dug through the grove and around the tumbling buildings. He did not find what he sought so madly, but he was not disheartened for long. After wavering for a time, he would again press on, ever bearing in his heart the hope that the next thrust of the spade would touch the treasure. Had not old Somers said that it was hidden on his land?

V

TEN years had passed since Somers died, leaving behind the doubtful legacy of treasure to his avaricious neighbor. It was a quiet day in autumn, and Dan Griffith was sitting on the stone beneath the maple tree that Somers had planted so long before.

Griffith was not digging to-day. His spade stood with its handle leaning against the tree. He was weary, resting his worn body, and watching the slow Jacobsen approach. More than once in recent time, Griffith had sat there exhausted, too tired to continue his discouraging task—sat there consumed with impatience as he watched Jacobsen leisurely digging.

"He might be digging for potatoes, the big, lazy devil, and not a fortune!" Griffith had often mumbled to himself, as in his heart he cursed the sluggard.

Jacobsen worked on with the stolid indifference of fate, never eager or excited, never hurrying; and his employer had not dared to upbraid him. Griffith had to coax and beg to get him to come and dig at all.

Griffith was another creature from the sleek, ruddy-faced, well-dressed, smart-appearing "gentleman farmer" who had sat here talking across the fence to Somers a decade before. He looked not merely ten, but twenty-five or thirty years older. Clothes that once had bulged with his puffy bulk hung loosely on his wasted, bony frame. The skin of his face sagged in shriveled, wrinkled folds. His florid color had turned to a sallow, deathly hue, and his black hair had become white.

But the eyes, weary and bitter, still glowed with the greedy flame that had burned in them years and years before, when he surveyed with lustful pride this strip of stolen ground. To-day they had no time for the stolen acres — acres now covered with stunted corn and grown about with thistles and parasite grass. They did not rove over the rest of his land, which was in the same wretched, abused condition—ill farmed, overrun with weeds, mortgaged to the last dollar it could bear.

The farm home stood a ruin. Where once bright-painted, snug structures rose in pride, drab, shambling sheds sprawled against the mournful sky. Scrawny cattle wandered in red grass where in times past sleek kine had grazed.

Griffith's eyes had no time for barns, or stock, or any of the shadowy shells of the things that had delighted his swinish heart in days agone. They were bent on what he then had scorned—old Somers's land, now his own, and hiding somewhere a treasure which he still believed would requite him for all his toil and sacrifice and agony, for all the piled up hell of bootless years.

Though at times he had doubted, he did not longer doubt that finding the money would make up for all what seeking it had cost him.

The cost! Griffith shuddered with realization of that cost. His property was slipping from him. Already, in anticipation, he saw over it the gesture of the sheriff's hammer. The only thing he had left unpledged, the one thing he had never put in pawn, was the land in which the buried treasure lay.

The cost! He had lost the esteem of his neighbors, lost his old self-love. His wife was dead, her heart broken by this hunt for treasure, broken by the trouble he had brought to all of them, by the wreck of their fortunes, their happiness, and their lives.

His son, because of him, from a steady, hard-working youth had become a drunkard and a bum, working now and then for money to buy whisky. And his daughter! Cast aside by the man she loved because of her father's fatal greed, the girl had left home in wanton, desperate spite, and had gone out to work for strangers. A daughter of Dan Griffith a common hired girl! Flung alone and friendless into a world of temptation and evil, with never a word from her, who knew to what worse fate she might not have come?

Sitting on the stone beneath the maple tree, Griffith for a moment buried his face in his hands and sobbed in a broken man's despair; but again, as before, borne along by the madness in his blood, he put aside all else but thought of riches, and summoned the dregs of his strength to find the treasure.

Jacobsen had at last arrived on the spot where he had left his spade to go home for his midday meal. He was poking aimlessly about in the dirt near the fence, digging now, as always, just as if he were digging for potatoes instead of for a fortune.

Griffith had noted an added sluggishness and indifference about the man during the last few days, since he had been unable to pay Jacobsen each night, as he had always managed to do before. He feared he could not prevail on the other, in his stubborn, hateful humor, to labor much longer. Nowhere could he turn for money. Nobody would consider helping him, except Jacobsen, and Jacobsen was about to desert him.

Weakened, exhausted, broken down, he could not drive a spade into the perverse, rebellious earth. He thought of the buried treasure, thought of its velvety softness, sensed the languorous feel of it in his trembling hands, feasted his eyes on its glorious luster.

He knew the money would soon be found. Why, perhaps it was close to the spot where Jacobsen was digging now!

The sluggard sank the steel a few inches with the heel of his boot, relaxed, and leaned sleepily on the handle, his wide face showing rosy in the sunlight.

A spasm of fury shook Griffith at sight of the lazy devil loafing there, when perhaps the treasure lay right beneath his spade. He rose unsteadily to his feet, screamed horribly, and sank upon the rock, a writhing, huddled form.

VI

The man with the spade heard the scream, and, as much as it was in his nature to hurry for anything, he hurried to the prone and gasping creature. One look at the ghastly face and glassy eyes told Jacobsen that the treasure seeker's time was near at hand.

He tore loose Griffith's shirt collar and dragged him into the partial shade of the tree, with his head against the trunk and his body half lying, half reclining, on the stone. He bathed his face from the jug of water they kept beside the tree to slake their thirst. He gave him a drink, and ran home to telephone a doctor and to get horses and buggy to take the sick man to his home.

Reaching his own place, Jacobsen told his sister to call the physician, and then hitched a team to a vehicle. As he was about to climb into the seat, the dying words of old Somers—words that slumbered in his mind for years—echoed in his ears:

"Give this letter to Griffith when he comes to die."

He trotted back into the house, took a yellowed missive from his trunk, and, dashing into the buggy, whipped his horses at a gallop to where Griffith lay. His sister was amazed at the spectacle of him in such excited haste, even in a time of death.

The dying man was sprawled where Jacobsen had left him, his eyes staring blankly over the field of stunted corn. The younger man drew the crumpled envelope from his pocket.

"Just before old Somers died, he told me to give you this when you came to die," he said.

Griffith sat up, his eyes and his blood aflame.

"Tell me what it says," he commanded.

Jacobsen tore open the envelope, pulled out a sheet of paper, and read these words:

> Griffith, the money is buried under the stone beside the tree on my land that you stole.

The old man flung back his head, the weight of time and woe and failure tumbling from his squaring shoulders. He sensed the languorous feel of the treasure and saw its glorious yellow, as he had sensed and seen it time on time throughout the long years of seeking.

He stumbled to his knees, seized the heavy rock, and dragged it from its place—a feat impossible to him except in his delirium. Clambering to his feet, he grasped the spade standing against the tree, and began digging furiously.

After a few spadefuls of earth, the sharp blade struck a substance that gave forth a vague thud. The next moment the steel emerged with pieces of rotting cloth clinging to its edge.

The frenzied man thrust his bare hands into the dirt and pulled out an old felt boot. As it appeared, it burst in pieces, and a mass of faded bank notes scattered over the upturned earth.

Like a wave of tarnished gold, the money lay in the sunshine that gleamed through the thinning foliage—lay and fluttered there in smooth, decaying splendor.

Griffith plunged his hands into the pile, gently caressing its damp and moldering softness. Then, with a terrible cry, he fell face down upon the treasure—dead.

WAKING

I saw the dimly gathering daylight gleam;
  The risen sun was on me, and from sleep
I lifted slowly up the tides of dream;
  I roused me as a diver lifts from deep
To deep, slow drifting through great waters green,
Where many an uncouth flitting shape is seen,
To burst at last into an infinite sky,
His limbs so free that he can almost fly.
Mounting to wider being, larger breath,
Is it not thus that I shall wake, at death?

Harry Kemp

The Tainted Woman

A STORY OF MODERN LIFE IN THE INTERNATIONAL PLAYGROUND OF THE RIVIERA

By Vance Thompson

Author of "The Man of the Miracle," "Eat and Grow Thin," etc.

ON his way from Monte Carlo to San Remo, where he is staying, Andrew Torpichen has two adventures. The first is a violent brawl with a stranger—named Prince Kurokin, as he learns later—who needlessly insults him. The second is a meeting with a ragged Russian refugee, who begs Torpichen to help him to get into Italy, as the frontier guards have barred him out. Andrew refuses, but on reaching San Remo he finds that the vagabond has accompanied him, having hidden himself under a pile of rugs in Torpichen's car while the owner's back was turned.

The next day he sees this same fellow go to the gate of a villa in San Remo and give the butler a small package—"for your master," the vagabond says. Torpichen also encounters the lady of the villa, a mysterious blond woman who, from their first meeting, seems to hold him under some strange spell. It is a disturbing fascination, for Andrew is engaged to be married; and Betty Demdyke, his fiancée, is soon to visit his aunt, the Princess Castelmare, at San Remo.

Hugh Forbess, a young Englishman who admires Betty, and does not know of her engagement, brings his yacht into the harbor. When the princess tells him of the girl's betrothal to her nephew, an old friend of hers, a fine old Jesuit priest, once known to the world as the Baron Testevi, takes Forbess to his chalet on the hill above the town, to find consolation in this quiet retreat.

VI

IT was in Torpichen's destiny to learn that one may love one woman and yet—

Where he broke off was at the thought of Betty Demdyke. Of course he loved her. The mere mention of her name warmed his heart. He called up her young, glad face, her gentle eyes, with the dear brown light in them, her youth and lovableness. Of course he loved her. He had never really wanted any one else in all his life—just Betty.

And she loved him. It was a wonderful moment when she came into his arms and gave him her lips—tremulous and fragrant as rose leaves—and told him that she loved him. They should have gone away that day, been married in some swift, quiet way, and fled into a wilderness with their love and their happiness.

What right had the old dragons of life to bid them wait? Because Betty was so young? Well, that was why Torpichen loved her. He loved her youth—Betty's fragrant youth—with all the fire of his own young years. Why wait?

This year of probation—what was it doing to him? Something had thrust itself into his life—something that was whispering to him vaguely of unknown peaks gleaming with fire, of unknown depths black with turmoil and temptation—a dangerous thing! They should not have sent him away from Betty's little hands, and her youth and lovableness.

Of course he loved her! It was that which had driven him from his aunt's dining room the other night, when they began prattling about her. He hated the sound of her name on that fearsome old woman's lips. It was sacrilege; and the others—that chap Forbess—no, it was more than he could endure. It had driven him out of the room, out of the house.

Of course he loved Betty! Oh, if she would only come! Still another day to wait—two days—a week!

Even as he told himself these things, repeating them again and again, so that no doubt of their truth might find a lurking

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place in his mind, Torpichen knew that he was lying. If he knew that he loved Betty, he also knew that—

Aye, it was coming on him again! It came when he was awake, when he was asleep, when he was alone, when he hid himself in a crowd—the vision, precise, insistent, of the blond woman with her laughing mouth and equivocal eyes, her long blond body and the metallic hair streaming over it. For the hundredth time he damned her.

Who was she, anyway?

He knew the sort of thing she was. The theologians who had their part in educating him had taught him that she was sin—a golden-haired sin to be shuddered away from—a beautiful sin, when seen from without, because it was garmented with silk and perfume and trailing hair and laughter; but underneath were leprosy and fetid flesh.

With a spasm of anger he cursed the woman who had brought this evil into his life.

Perhaps he spoke half aloud. Some one in a doorway cackled. It was a dwarf, hammering the heel of a shoe, held between his knees. His head was huge and dirty, and scarred with smallpox—a symbol of evil!

"I'm seeing it everywhere," Torpichen muttered.

He found that he was in the old town. His feet had brought him to this refuge, away from the people he knew; but even here the blond woman haunted him and evil faces mocked him.

He was standing in front of the old Cancelleria. There, too, evil things glared at him. They were on the ancient doorway—monsters, grotesque birds and dolphins, battered angels with wings—all the pathetic exfoliations of stone by which the piety of the Middle Ages sought to constrain inanimate matter to the action of grace.

An inscription caught his eye, and he puzzled it out, getting the sense of the Latin:

Cornu bos capitur—voce ligatur homo.

"As an ox is taken by the horn, so a man is tied by a voice."

What, tied by a voice? It must mean some kind of a spell. Perhaps the word hints at witchcraft.

Torpichen had heard a voice like that—a voice of sorcery and laughter; but neither that voice nor any other would he follow—as an ox is led by a rope. He was master of himself and his pride and his love; and Betty was coming—in a day, in two days! Betty was coming, and all would be as it was before in a world of peace made beautiful by her love. Betty was coming!

It was at that moment and no other that his destiny once more took him in hand. His love and pride, and the self-mastery of which he was boasting even then, faded out like ghosts.

He heard the voice, and the blond woman came to him. Out of what dark street she came he did not know. She wore a pale dress of gray, that glittered with points of silver or steel. As she came toward him, she seemed to ripple and shine all over—like a grayling, he thought, swimming slowly up stream.

Thus she came toward him in a noise of silk and silver. He noticed that first, and the picture she made, with the flaring parasol of rose and amber forming a background to her uplifted face. Then he saw that she was very pale. He took off his hat, but did not speak.

"I thought it was you," she said, "so I came back."

The voice was not so clear as he remembered it. There were dull tones in it.

"I did not see you at all. I was looking at these things," and he glanced at the stone monsters.

"You have not been nice to me, Mr. Torpichen!"

"You know my name?"

"Yes."

"And yours?"

She gave no heed to the question.

"A week ago—eight days—"

"I know!" Torpichen interrupted.

"Why have you not come to see me?"

"There were so many reasons why I should not go to see you, and only one reason why I should go!"

"I don't care about the others. Tell me the one reason."

"It is the least important of them all."

She turned away a step or two, hesitated, and then said, without looking at him:

"You dislike me very much?"

"No."

"Then tell me," she persisted, "the one reason—why you should not have come, I mean."

"The only reason I had was that I—wanted to go."

"And you wouldn't?"

"No."

She came close to him, smiling a little. Her eyes were equivocal. He saw a faint light of triumph in them.

"Since you have told me that, I do not care," she said in her old light way, and, as she spoke, the color rose in her face. "One doesn't like to think one has been merely forgotten, does one? I am glad I came back when I saw you!"

Had he resisted? Now, at least, his resistance was dead. The glamour had fallen upon him. He answered her smile.

"Come!" she whispered, and touched his arm.

A few steps brought them to the Piazzetta dei Dolori and the poor church of Santa Brigitta. There was sunlight there. On the steps of a shop opposite the church sat a woman, suckling a fat, half naked child. She looked up and smiled at them with Latin sympathy, for she could see that they were happy. The girls drawing water in the little square — black-haired girls in reds and blues—laughed and shouted "*Buona fortuna!*" as they do when lovers pass.

"It is like the East," she observed vaguely.

She was holding her parasol like a cane, and picking her way down the cobblestone street with infinite care.

"How did you ever get up here?" he asked.

"Oh, I just followed," she replied calmly.

"Followed? Do you mean you followed me?"

"Now you have something to think of, haven't you? You might help me down. These stones are awfully rough!"

The street had become a sunless tunnel. A woman with a wine cask on her head passed them. Then they were brushed aside by a mule hidden in a load of hay. They took refuge in a doorway, and a lean brown goat squeezed a way out between them and went soberly up the street, to deliver her milk at the shop.

The blond woman laughed and was happy.

"Oh, it's delightful!" she exclaimed. "My dress is in ribbons — and this vile road!"

"It is better below," he assured her, helping her down the rugged street.

There were stone arches overhead, and gay rags hung from the high windows. As if summoned by her laughter, a procession of black-eyed children, grinning and silent, followed them, seemingly inventing some new and fearful game.

"Do you see that man?" she asked suddenly. "There!"

They had come out into the Via Palma. Farther on was a bridge with a little iron railing, and in front of it the wide door of a smithy. Just within the door the smith stood, in the shower of sparks that rose from the white iron he was beating on the anvil. He was naked to the waist. On his head dangled a red woolen cap, and a leather apron hid his legs. He loomed up in the light from the forge, a powerful animal, his naked hide glistening with sweat, his bold eyes staring at them, but resting chiefly on the woman.

"I would like to be that man," she said, and drew Torpichen nearer to the smithy, with a guiding pressure of his arm. "Oh, I should like to be that man! I should like to swing that hammer, and swing it and swing it, and bring it down like that! I should like to beat iron! Oh, the splendid brute!"

Her frank admiration called the fellow out of the forge. He thrust his naked torso through the door, and flashed a smile of red lips and white teeth at her.

"Ah, the beautiful lady!" he exclaimed boldly.

She laughed with pleasure.

"Wait, beautiful one!" he cried. "Do not go until I give you good fortune!"

In spite of Torpichen's sulky impatience, she waited while the man went into the smithy and came again, holding in his huge paw a tiny donkey shoe, worn thin and shining on the stony roads. He gave it to her with deference, and then straightened up and stared her in the face, reading there her admiration for his strength and vitality. Indeed he might have been a primitive symbol of life, this half naked brute, with his powerful arms and hairy breast, his sun-stained hide, his exultant vigor, his reeking odor of sweat and grime and charcoal smoke.

"I have given you good fortune!" he repeated, throwing back his big, handsome head.

He was like a friendly bull. She wanted to stroke his shaggy head. What she did was to thank him, laughingly, and to slip the tiny semicircle of steel on her wrist, as if it had been a bracelet. Then she let

Torpichen lead her away; but even so, she glanced back over her shoulder and smiled at the smiling smith in the doorway.

" Was it really necessary, do you think?" Torpichen asked quietly.

" What?"

" To let that fellow—"

" To let that fellow do what?" she prompted, as he paused.

" Well, to let him see that you admired him."

" But I do!"

She glanced back. The smith was leaning out from the low doorway, watching her, and he waved his red cap and laughed once more.

Torpichen kept silent as they walked along. She, on her part, seemed to pay attention to everything but him. She whistled to a dingy bird in a cage. She said "*Bon giorno*," with the right San Remese accent, to an ancient woman crawling in the sunlight. Finally she looked up at Torpichen with her girlish eyes, and said:

" Well?"

" You made that blackguard happy," he answered coldly.

" I love to make people happy!"

" Or unhappy, eh? One or the other—it doesn't much matter, does it?"

" Don't be cross," she retorted. Her smile was direct and winsome, and she touched him lightly, as if he were a refractory animal. " And don't bully," she added.

Against his will, he yielded to her charm; but even when they came down at last into the market place, he was taciturn. The black brute in the smithy was still in his thoughts. She talked on blithely.

" Isn't that a beautiful church?" she exclaimed, looking at old San Siro.

" Everything seems beautiful to you, I should fancy. I may be wrong, but I think —well, I think it is a monstrous thing."

" And I didn't know!"

" Eight centuries ago it might have been a church, but now it is only degradation—stucco and fustian. You see, it has been restored—and so it is done for. The logic of it and its symbol are lost—smothered under all those fool restorations, as they call them. It isn't a church any more. You might stable mules or aldermen there. Anyway, there are no churches in Italy."

Torpichen amused her as he went ranting on. He was working off his ill temper, she fancied, and it may be she was right.

" St. Peter's in Rome isn't a church," he declared. " It is a palace, if you will, or a reception room for princes and prelates, but it is not a church. All the four hundred churches in Rome put together are not worth one little ogival chapel of the meanest French cathedral. Ah, the French knew how to love God! Gothic architecture means something. It points up. All its arches leap skyward. These stone hulks keep a man's soul down. This one is as bad as any of them. It is a stable!"

" Then Christ should feel at home there," she murmured softly.

He did not seem to hear her. Perhaps she had not meant him to hear. After a moment she asked:

" What is that over the door?"

She called his attention to a bush growing over the portal. It was a straggling bush with long, crooked branches and dull green leaves, rooted in the old stone above the door of the church.

" I don't know," he replied.

" What a strange home it has found—that wild green thing!"

They went closer, to get a better view of it. Suddenly she caught at his arm and gave a startled cry.

" Who's that?"

At first Torpichen saw no one. Then, in the deep shadow of the portal—just beneath the caper bush—he made out the dark-robed figure of the *padre,* and behind him, coming from the church, a man he thought was Forbess. The Jesuit, his huge black hat in his hand, was looking steadily at the woman, with cold gray eyes.

" What the devil is he staring like that for?" Torpichen muttered under his breath.

Then he noticed that Forbess was examining him in much the same persistent way. He broke upon them with a sharp—

" Good morning!"

The two men bowed and passed on, out into the sunlight of the street. It was not until they were out of hearing that the woman spoke.

" He frightened me at first," she said, " standing there like that and staring. I hate priests!"

She slyly touched the little donkey shoe dangling on her wrist. Torpichen laughed.

" A precaution?" he asked.

" Oh, a superstition, I suppose, but one never knows. I always touch iron when I meet a priest. Who was the man with him?"

"A chap named Forbess."

"He doesn't matter, but that old priest! He is a Jesuit? I wonder if he knows anything about me?" As she put the question, she looked up with the narrowing eyes that Torpichen did not like. "Why did he look at me like that?"

"Mere rudeness, I presume," Torpichen answered shortly.

His own thoughts were hovering round Forbess, and in those thoughts was pretty nearly the question she had put concerning the *padre*. He wondered what Forbess meant by looking at him like that! The sight of the young Englishman had brought back to Torpichen's memory the dinner at his aunt's, and the talk, talk, talk of Betty. It wasn't anything that he wanted to think of now.

They were both silent for a while, walking on. Something had thrust itself in between them, and broken the contact. A sense of constraint, a brooding impatience, touched them both.

There was a jangle of bells in the Via Vittorio Emmanuele as a cab with mouse-colored ponies in blue harness approached.

"Will you put me in that cab, please?" the blond woman said, with a touch of mockery in her quiet voice. "It came quite opportunely, didn't it?"

"No," Torpichen answered. "I'm sorry!"

But he was not sure that he would be sorry to bid her good-by.

She stepped into the low carriage without waiting for his assistance, and gave the cabman her address. Torpichen lingered, waiting for her to speak to him. At last she smiled, always with that faint hint of mockery and veiled defiance, and said:

"You are coming to see me? This evening, isn't it?"

"Yes, this evening."

"So glad! Good-by."

She told the cabman to drive on, and the jangling bells, the creaking wheels, and the little clattering hoofs drowned the good-by he finally brought himself to offer.

She did not look back.

Torpichen watched the carriage until he could no longer see her lolling there—her slender body, which seemed to glitter with silver and gray, her hair, like some strange metal in the sunlight, the terror of her beauty.

"Acorns of love!" he told himself once more.

How many men had gone on all fours, at Circe's bidding, to crunch the acorns of love! But he, thank God, was erect on two feet—master of himself—his own master. There was no reason why he should see her again—that evening, or any other evening.

"It is better that way," he reflected. "I'll not go. She is the kind of woman to keep away from. I'll send her a note and cry off."

It was a sensible decision, and he assured himself that it was clear-cut and final. He carried it with him proudly as he struck out for his hotel on the hill.

VII

Torpichen's good resolutions were strong upon him, and he carried them with him all day. He would go to the Palazzo Castelmare, see his aunt, and make amends for his bad behavior. He would even show a friendly side to Forbess, if by chance they met, and to the *padre*.

It was awkward that they should have confronted him there by the church. He half remembered that the blond woman had caught at his arm as those two came unexpectedly from the darkness of the portal. He wondered what they had seen, and what misinterpretation they had put upon his attitude.

What the deuce did it matter? He was accountable for what he did only to himself—to himself and Betty.

But he would have to see the princess and put her mind at ease, in case the *padre* had gossiped. Probably the *padre* would gossip. When a man puts a skirt on, he can't help it; but Torpichen wasn't going to be badgered by old women and priests.

In his hotel, he dined alone at a little table. At the door his motor car waited, with Marwick at the wheel, to take him to the Palazzo Castelmare.

He had just finished his coffee when one of the pages brought him a letter. It was a thick, square envelope, addressed in heavy, angular writing to "M. Torpichen," and bearing in one corner the words "*Pour lui même*"—for himself alone.

For a moment he held it unopened in his hand. It was as if the letter had an atmosphere of its own. Something subtler and more mysterious than perfume emanated from it, and set his pulses beating. Had the blond woman been standing beside him, he could hardly have sensed her presence more acutely.

When at last he opened the letter, he found—written in the same black-pointed script—only a few words in English:

> Do you need this to remind you that you are expected at the Villa Corinte this evening? Or hadn't you forgotten?
>
> LAMIA BORG.

So that was her name—or perhaps one of her names! Borg was a vile name, he thought, blunt and clownish; but Lamia—it sang like running water, like little elves dancing in their glass slippers.

He sent for his hat and coat, and put them on. Almost automatically he went out to his car, the letter still in his hand.

"I shan't want you to-night, Marwick," he said.

He took the car himself, and drove slowly through the town. The lighted window of a flower shop caught his eye. He spent some time selecting the flowers he wanted—iris flowers. Then he gave himself the pleasure of driving slowly up the smooth road to the Berigo.

The night was around him. The sky was black velvet, through which the constellations were beginning to force their way. Westward, where the sun had long since vanished, there were splashes and stains of rusty redness—like the blood of a bull that might have been gored to death there.

He drove on, easing the car up the hill.

Her name was Lamia! Always he thought of the little elves whose tinkling crystal slippers made the music of the running brook. She belonged to that world!

Nature is always well bred, whether it laughs in the sunlight or screams in tempest. It possesses the rare quality of never, under any circumstances, being vulgar. Lamia was like that, whether she brawled with the donkey boys or flaunted her beauty at a black fellow in a smithy. Nature has a way of pulling one to it, in spite of all one can do. The divine element in it demands worship.

Just such a call came to him from the blond woman. Aye, now he understood! It was woman's mystery calling to him, as a white nymph calls in the dusk of the forest.

The cry that seemed to reach him from the depth of her mystery was no longer wholly one of enchantment. It was something more compelling, as if the white nymph were crying for help there in the darkness and the terror of the forest. He must answer—must go to her!

"Yes, I am going to her—through the darkness—going to her!"

Quite suddenly his whole being quivered with an exaltation which he could not define, so vague it was. It was as if all the atoms—the primordial particles of energy that made up his being—were thronging to her, like a crowd toward a festival, like an army toward the enemy. Either the gladness or the terror of his destiny was driving him toward her!

The villa and the garden blazed with lights, as for a triumph. The iron gates stood wide with a gesture of welcome.

Torpichen drove slowly up the winding path, past trees deformed by the crude artificial light, and casting evil shadows of deformity. The red leaves of the Judas tree mouthed and muttered. Glancing past them, he saw the gaping ravine, which fell, sheer and horrible, from the garden wall to the *torrente* far below. The naked electric light seemed to stream down into it, like rotting water. An evil place!

When he stopped at the pillared entrance, the butler came to meet him, leaving the house door open. Torpichen did not look at the man. He knew him obscurely as a servant to whom he was delivering up his coat and hat and a long paper box of flowers. He expected him to remain effaced—useful and impersonal as a piece of furniture; but in some way or other this fellow obtruded himself. It was not so much his bigness as the truculent air he had. His face was strong, dark, and cruel. His eyes were sullen.

Torpichen remembered the man well enough. The scene he had witnessed at the gate—how long ago it seemed!—came back to his memory. He saw once more the limping peasant, the dog, and the vagabond, fierce with wrath, before which this flunky, for all his arrogance, had quailed.

Why were those three brawling at the gates of her house? Torpichen wished now that he had been able to overhear more of their conversation.

"If you please, sir," the big butler was saying.

He ushered Torpichen into a salon lighted with tiny electric bulbs. The furniture was green and gold, vaguely Empire. Old rugs formed little pools of color—of gray, of burned brown, of blue steel — on the shining surface of the parquet. There were not many pictures. One of them—a misty landscape—was very wonderful. There seemed to be cypress trees in it, in the mist. White marbles caught the light—a head of Rodin, and satyrs that looked like his sons.

And then Torpichen noticed the flowers.

There were flowers everywhere—in vases and glass boats and green jars. The air was humid with the scent of them. They exhaled their lives in great waves, odorous, heavy, funereal—suggesting caves of saltpeter and mildew. For the first time Torpichen realized the horror of amputated flowers, rotting slowly to death in a human habitation. It is an evil thing we do to them, he thought.

He crossed to the hearth, where an olive log burned with pure flames, and stood looking down into the fire. He had waited for some time before he heard her light footsteps in the hall.

He turned and faced the door as she entered. She wore a white gown; all lace it was, rippling about her like breaking foam. Her bust, of warmer white, rose flowerlike from the pale corsage. Around her throat was a drooping collar of multiple pearls, spaced with diamonds. In front one big red pearl gloomed, pendent. The glamour of lace and pearls exalted her into lyric beauty.

With a swift step that threw all the harmonies of her gown into music, she crossed the room to him and held out her hands.

"How good of you to come!" she murmured softly.

"You knew I would come."

"Perhaps," she replied.

Neither of them spoke of the note she had sent him. She stepped back a little, and looked at him with frank admiration.

Torpichen was a handsome man, in his evening livery of black and white. Rather large and long of limb, he still gave the impression, in spite of length and breadth, of being a compact, capable animal—one that could pull down a running deer. His hair was of a lightish brown, very thick, but kept smooth by hard daily brush work. It was short, and grew well down over the forehead.

The eyes with which he looked at her were dark blue in color, and set wide apart. High cheek bones, square jaws, a straight nose and mouth unexpectedly delicate in outline, gave dignity to the face, in spite of its youthfulness. It was a good head, the kind of head with which men walked the Aryan world in the long ago, but fined down by hereditary habits of thought and feeling. He radiated force, whether grave or gay, precisely as the blond woman radiated light.

It was a kind of hereditary force, it may be—the careless racial triumph, the calm Aryan supremacy, which irritates the inferior races. The woman felt it beating in upon her, wave after wave. She gave a little crooning laugh of sheer pleasure.

"You must be very strong," she said. "I love strength!"

There were fauteuils near the fire. She sat down, looking very slender and young in the wide Empire chair. She held her small head very high.

"And you know we may smoke!"

She told him where the cigarettes were, and he brought the silver box to her. They lighted Russian cigarettes.

Neither was in haste to speak. Torpichen, leaning forward in his chair, studied her face. He thought it wonderfully beautiful. In the unrelenting light of the electric bulbs, he discovered many things that had been hidden from him in the sunlight. There the impression of her juvenile beauty made him forget her age.

"She is not so young as I thought," he told himself. "Twenty-six, perhaps."

The artificial light deceived him. As a matter of fact, she was three years younger than Torpichen, and he was twenty-five years old.

He came nearer the truth when he decided that her mystery—which is woman's inexorable charm—was made up of many parts. Through what a series of avatars she must already have run! How many rôles in life she must have successively played! In how many nests had she made her home!

"Of what are you thinking?" she asked at last, but without much interest.

"Of you," he replied.

"That's nice! Tell me—"

"Has it occurred to you how strange it is that we should be sitting here together—two exiles, warming our hearts at a log of olive wood? How did we get here? Why should it be we two? There are so many millions of people wandering in space, but this fire was lighted just for us—you and me. Perhaps," he added, "it is not the first time. That might explain it. I seem to know the way to your hearthstone so well that it can't be the first time!"

"You think so, really?"

"It might be. In fact, I am convinced,"

he replied, "that we were shark and shark together, once upon a time, off the African coast."

"Were we that kind, do you think?" she asked, smiling.

"That kind and many others. We must have been through it again and again."

She, too, was leaning forward now, and their eyes met—blue looking wistfully into darker blue. She drew her hand across her forehead, brushing back the heavy hair.

"I could tell you things about myself," she said in a low voice. "I am sure you would understand and believe them. They sound so mad that I've never dared to tell them to any one; but I know I can tell them to you."

"Yes, you can tell them to me—as you did long ago."

"It is this," she went on, in the low tones that seemed to be almost confessional. "Can you conceive what it is to live in a present which is just as real and plain as can be, and yet to know that you have another life behind you, crowding you down? It sounds quite mad, I know. To be afraid of something that is really yourself—you never doubt it is yourself, but you know it is an older self—can you understand that? That is where the fear comes from. You dread what that other self will do, when the hour comes and it is called upon to do a certain thing. You see what I mean?"

"Yes—I know what you mean. It is the tragedy of having two lives to work out at the same time, with one pulling at the other."

"There is more than that," she whispered; "much more—and something worse. There are other people in it!"

She put her hand to her throat, where the pearls were, and tugged at the collar, as if a sense of strangulation oppressed her. The eyes she fastened on Torpichen were full of mystic fervor—so fierce an outlook of the vital force he had never faced. There was anguish in her look, and covetousness, as if she were claiming him from the depths of illimitable loneliness.

"Another life that is trying to work itself out," she repeated. "It must have been broken off in some terrible way, and it wants to go on—in me. It sounds quite mad, does it not?"

"No," he answered gently. "I have known of such things."

He drew his chair up beside her and took her hand. It was cold, and almost without pulse. For a long time she was silent, as if she had gone down into the farthest depths of her being. When at last she spoke, it was in so low a voice that he bent over her to listen.

"It is like going back along a dim trail through a cold, dark forest," she was saying. "I know I am going back on the long trail of my life. Then I come to a place that is like a crossroads in the forest, and it is filled with white mist. The mist chokes me"—she made the gesture again—"and again I know that something is there, and that it is running toward me in the mist. Then I, too, begin running this way and that way, trying to hide from it in the mist; but I know it will follow me until it pulls me down!"

"No," he said gently; "not if you turn and face it. You see, I think I know what is hiding there at the crossroads."

"It is an old, old life, striving to live again—in me."

"No, it is the fear. Do you think I don't know it? As I came into your garden to-night, I knew it was hiding there in the shadows among the trees. When we turn upon it together, and face it together, it will go away."

"Together? I wonder!"

Her eyes were far away, and on her face was that strange look of covetous anguish. Suddenly she pushed him away, and, cowering back in her chair, covered her face with her hands. He saw she was weeping—with that utter abandon which is, the mystics say, a sign of predestination.

Torpichen could not look at her. It seemed shameful to watch her sobbing there, without defense against his curiosity, naked even of her beauty. He crossed the room, and, turning his back, stared out into the night. He blamed himself for having led her up to the edge of this mad mood. He felt anger, regret, pity. What right had his clumsy fingers to fumble the delicate fabric of this woman's soul?

This dream she had tried to make plain to him—was it a dream? One of those dreams too volatile to be fixed in music or perfume or prayer? His intelligence had only half divided it. He had seen a little of that mystic side of her as they sat under the olive tree in the afternoon sunlight. A breath of pantheism had blown upon them, with whispers of the gay and savage wisdom of fauns and satyrs. For mankind that wisdom is mere madness, made of ecstasy and of the fear which the antique world called panic, because it was terror of the god Pan—of the universal god.

For a moment, Torpichen had felt a kinship to her wild soul. It was a moment that passed, but to-night it had returned. The sense of wild betrothal, outside of time and space, had come again to-night. The very life cells within him were calling to her—summoning her.

She came slowly across the floor and stood beside him.

"It was nice of you not to look at me!"

"Better now?"

"All right again," she replied.

To his surprise, her face was quiet and cold as a flower. It was as if she had gone down into the sources of her being and bathed there, and come up regenerate to meet common things again.

"And unashamed?" he asked.

"Utterly unashamed."

"That is as it should be. There can be no shame between us. Come back to the fire. Your hands are cold."

He held her hands close until human warmth crept back into them.

"I brought you some flowers," he added. "They are iris flowers. You see I remembered."

This light speech was premeditated. He did not know how far she was mistress of herself, whether she might not be caught up again by her mood of mystic terror.

He brought the coffin-shaped box from the hall, opened it before her, and laid the flowers on her knees. They sprawled there, monstrous, purplish black, emitting a dense odor.

"Oh, God!" she cried, shuddering back. "Those! Do you know what they are?"

"Iris," he said. "Why not?"

"The blood iris!" She stared at them fearfully, but with a kind of fascination. "They grow in graveyards, and on battlefields, and wherever blood is shed. Now and then the peasants bring them into town, but they will never tell where they get them. I know!" She glanced at him with her look of narrow, sly complicity. "I know! They are dug out of criminal earth. They are flowers of murder and death!"

Hesitatingly she touched one of the plants. It turned in her lap, almost like an animal.

"You see what it is doing? It is more than a plant!"

"Forgive me," he implored. "Throw the beastly things away! Of course, I didn't know."

"Yes—I must throw them away. You see how dark they are. That is the black blood in them."

Again she touched the thing—lingeringly, this time. It was almost a caress.

"I can't hate the poor things now, because you gave them to me. Anyway, it is not their fault. The peasants do it to them—make them like that. I know the secret. A peasant told me. Peasants tell me everything."

She laid one of the flowers against her cheek, and bent over it.

"Shall I tell you?" she asked, without looking up. "They bury living animals under the roots of the plants, and that is what makes them like this. There is life in them—the sad life of dogs and birds."

He snatched at the flowers, but she was too quick for him. In one swift movement she was on her feet, erect, the ominous plants held high over her head.

"Your flowers—the flowers you chose for me—the flowers of murder and death!"

She laughed boldly, taunting him.

"Throw them down!" he commanded savagely. "At once—make haste!"

His tone of authority startled her. Once again she laughed, but this time there was flattery in her laughter—perhaps amusement, too.

"You are right," she admitted. "They are horrible!"

She turned and threw the great black things on the flaming logs. Her face paled a little when the fire lapped around them, and they twisted and muttered in strange, half animal torment. Then she faced him calmly.

"I obeyed you, didn't I?"

Torpichen thanked her. He loved her action of sacrifice. To him it seemed beautiful, ritual, exorcising. In some mysterious way, he felt, she had made herself pure.

"And now good night," she said softly.

She must have rung the bell, for the butler opened the door and stood aside. When Torpichen had been helped to put on his coat, he turned. She was in the yellow cube of the doorway, and her slender body, silhouetted against the light, seemed to stand there in an aura of lace and pearls.

That was the vision he took away with him—the slender body, the hair that glowed like red amber, the lapis lazuli of her eyes, the enigmatic smile. It glided with him down the quiet road. He entered the dusk of his room, and, when he leaned from his open window, it seemed to be hovering there under the stars.

The night was cold and silent, and for a long time he lingered there by the window, motionless as a haunted man. Far below, a night singer, wandering home from the wine shop, sang—with a voice shining and supple as a clown—a song of love:

"Amore, amore, che m'hai fatto fare?
Amore, amore—"

Somewhere a dog came out and howled. From the gardens and the distant hills innumerable dogs gave answer—mystic and menacing as those Homeric hounds that bayed at the stars of the east and the north; and the night singer's erotic lay died in the tumult of the dogs.

Shuddering a little, as if touched by a premonition, Torpichen closed the window, shutting out the stars and the night; but the vision remained.

In the Berigo, another window had opened on the night. The blond woman stepped out on the balcony and stared down into the blackness of her garden, where all the trees were muttering. It was like looking into a pit where something fumed and simmered.

She fled to her bedroom, closing the window, locking it, and dropping the heavy curtains of impenetrable silk. Then she flared up all the lights in the room.

She went to and fro as she undressed, tossing her garments here and there. She looked long into the mirror, as she loosed her hair. She was cold and naked, but the mirror held her with compelling fascination, and she smiled at the face and the eyes that looked back into hers from the depths of the gleaming pool.

"He is right," she whispered. "I should be a terrible woman to love!"

She caught up a night robe, and wrapped it around her body. She glanced about the room in the furtive way she had at times. She unlocked a table drawer, and took out a gilt-tipped flask. It was nearly full of ether—the magic fluid that soothes the soul to sleep and makes the hours go by cool and white as milk.

She poured out a little, and drank. Then, with a sigh of peace, she lay down on her bed; and slowly she entered a palace, built of poison and mist. Hooded dreams passed mournfully, in unending procession, over the cloud-paved floors, in the silence.

She lay there with closed eyes and folded hands and feet. Life showed only in the rhythm of her breast, as her breath came and went. The electric lights burned vigilant and bright, flooding the room and covering the blond woman on the bed with cold radiance.

Light, light, and the poisonous draft—these were her weapons against the fear.

And yet the fear came. Always the fear stole into her palace, and ran, covert and dark like something on furry feet, up and down the corridors of ether and sleep.

Her face was wholly calm. It was a mask of marble in the hollow of her pillow; and her breathing was steady and low.

She was watching the hooded figures pass, a mournful procession of dreams.

VIII

"I SHALL have to ask you a question, Andrew."

"Yes, princess?"

She did not put the question immediately. Indeed, she was silent for a long time, and silence is a terrible argument.

They were sitting in a small salon of the Palazzo Castelmare, in chairs that faced each other defensively. Torpichen had come in answer to what was virtually a summons from his formidable kinswoman.

He was in her bad graces. Since the night when he broke up her little dinner party and fled the house, he had neglected her entirely, shunning even the streets through which she might drive or walk. He knew well enough why he did not wish to see her. There would be talk of Betty, and just now he dared not even think of her. There was no room for her in his thoughts. He kept her out of his dreams.

When at last the princess sent for him, he was almost glad to go to the Palazzo Castelmare and face her, because it meant that he would also have to face himself. There must be an end of drifting—an end of the self-deception in which he had taken refuge; and it was better that it should come now.

He was his own master, he told himself once more, and master of his destiny. Even yet he had not realized that he was merely a strange some one to whom things happen; that events bore down upon him with their implacable tyranny; that obscure wills, working in the darkness, were shaping his destiny; that he—and Betty and the blond woman—were the center of a formidable conspiracy, which had come whispering down through the ages, never releasing them, awaiting the hour of fulfillment. This he did not know; but deep within him he knew, now, that this decisive hour, planned long ago, was very near.

When Betty came—he had made up his mind to it—he would go to her frankly and tell her what had come into his life. It was the only decent thing to do. He would give her back her freedom—her right to find a love that was worthy of her.

He must think of her—of her freedom. He dared not let himself think of what his own freedom would mean to him. It was spacious and wonderful as night, and through it came, glimmering with enchantment and pearls, a slender woman, laughing, with outstretched hands—

He was penitent. His very soul was abased with shame that he had done this grievous wrong to little Betty. His shame and sorrow were sincere, but—in spite of himself—underneath them crept the fire of an outlaw joy.

His freedom—and Lamia!

" What is the question, princess?" he asked, for she did not break the silence.

She loomed up in front of him, massive and formidable, her eyes staring at him like those of a man.

" This one will do first," she began. " Why haven't you been to see me?"

" Of course, I should have called, but you are not going to rag me for that, are you? I'm sorry. One does pick up bad manners here, doesn't one?"

" You have picked up more than bad manners, Andrew," she said bluntly. " It's bad morals, I'm afraid."

Torpichen was silent for a moment. Then he asked:

" Will you explain?"

The princess laughed stormily.

" How can I explain it? It seems to run in your family—a lack of dignity—a lack of self-respect, I call it. Anyway, it is showing a lack of respect for me and mine," she concluded.

" That is not very clear," he answered evasively, but his face had darkened. " I really think you will have to tell me exactly what you mean."

" I should have told you nothing, if you had kept your bad morals to yourself; but when it comes to a public scandal—"

" Ah! Please go on!"

" Don't take that tone with me, Andrew. You know as well as I do that merely to show yourself with that sort of woman is scandalous; and if it is an insult to me, it is worse—far worse—for Betty!"

" Listen, please," Torpichen put in quietly. " I shan't pretend to misunderstand you; but, after all, my acquaintances are my own affair."

" They are Betty's affair—and mine—and her mother's."

" Betty's—yes. It is her affair, and I am only waiting for her to come. But yours? No!"

" It is my business first, Andrew Torpichen," the princess declared grimly, " as you shall discover. I know the sort of person you are parading about with. Did you suppose I wouldn't find out, with every one laughing at your infatuation for a—"

Perhaps something in Torpichen's face bade her pause, for she added irrelevantly:

" You were always silly, but I thought you were done with that sort of thing. It is simply an infatuation! I am still willing to do the best I can for you, Andrew," she added in a kindlier voice, for she was not without an old, familiar affection for him. " When you've broken it off, after a while —for I am sure you see that at present I could not possibly have you meeting Betty —after a while, you can come back and we'll see what can be done. That is the very best I can promise you, Andrew."

She stood up, to show that she had ended what she had to say, and forced him to rise.

" That is final, Andrew."

" You have been writing to Betty? This infernal gossip—if that old priest in petticoats has—"

" The *padre* has not said a word."

" No matter who it is! You've written this sort of lying gossip to Betty, behind my back? It was poisonous!"

" It was true," she answered haughtily. " You cannot deny it was true."

" Everything that is to be said, princess, I shall say to Betty," he returned. " It is for her and for me. I shall not permit any one's interference—not even yours."

" Are you done?" she asked. Her harsh,

handsome face showed the dominating ill temper which was never far from the surface. "Then I will give you my last word, Andrew Torpichen, before you go. I have received you for the last time. So has my sister. As for Betty, you shall never speak to her again—never see her—"

"Never see Betty again?" he exclaimed. "Even Omnipotence should hesitate to give orders like that. Not only shall I see her, but—"

He broke off, for at that moment the door was thrown open, and Betty Demdyke herself ran in. With a wild little cry, she threw herself into his arms and clung to him.

The thin, wavering woman who followed her, meekly protesting, was Mrs. Demdyke. She seemed to be in a state of pathetic confusion. Without a word or look for Torpichen, she hastened to her sister's side, and stood there, waiting, as one waits in the shadow of a fortress.

"Andrew, oh, at last!" the girl whispered. "Why didn't you come before?"

She seemed to be aware of the hostility of the two elder women—of her mother's weak anger and her aunt's hardness—and determined to accept her share of it. She drew back a little from him, but her hands still held fast to his.

"Andrew!"

Even then the unhappy young man did not return her greeting. Dazed at the suddenness of her coming, and at the trick that had been played upon him by the princess, he could only stare with profound eyes into the girl's troubled face.

Slowly the horror of it all began to creep over him; for he knew now—God help him, he knew—that his beautiful love for Betty Demdyke had gone out of him. He had lost it, this serene, sweet love which was to have saved him from himself and from the wilderness. In his heart he could find, for her, only compassion and infinite pity—her poor little troubled face! His love for her was dead.

"Oh, Andrew!" It was a cry of anguish and unbelief. "Andrew! They have told me horrible things about you!"

Still he could not speak. He was trying to realize it—that his love, his young, pure love, had been taken away from him, and that he was left naked and without defense. What could he say to her? Self-horror, an immense shame, obscured his mind when he tried to think of what he must say.

Still the girl looked up at him. A slow pallor crept into her face. Her brown eyes opened wide, and perhaps for the first time in her life fear was in them.

The two women, standing side by side like sybils, watched this tragedy of youth and love in silence. Then at last the princess spoke, in a voice triumphant but not unkindly.

"Betty, dear, come to your mother—and me," she said. "Every word I told you is true, and more than I could tell you is true. He can deny nothing—"

"Stop!" the girl cried in an anguished voice. "I will not hear a word—only from you, Andrew, only from you! Tell me this is not true!"

She was very pale, very quiet, as if in some way her girlhood were leaving her and the tragedy of womanhood were creeping upon her. She still held his hand. In the pride of her love and faith she waited.

He felt compassion, immense pity, for himself, for her, but most of all for her. If only he could take her in his arms and swear that it was all false, that he loved her, loved her, with the dear, pure love of youth and gladness—their love, as of old and forever and ever!

But the lie would kill her, more surely than the truth. For his soul's sake, he could not lie to her.

"Betty!"

It was the first word he had spoken since she ran into his arms with her wild cry of pain and passion. It was almost the last word he was to speak to her there in the tragic room where the two old women, somber as fates, watched them and listened.

The mere sound of his voice, speaking her name, was for the girl almost a confession. Quietly she released his hand and stood away from him, her own hands clasped on her heart. Her eyes, wide with the new fear that had come into them, were tearless.

The words Torpichen finally brought himself to say were these.

"I do not know what they have told you, Betty. If it is not the truth, it does not matter, for I am afraid the truth is quite as bad."

With a little moan, the girl went still farther back from him, as if something were pushing her away.

"I am not worthy of loving you, Betty," he continued. "God have pity on us, but I am not worthy!"

He did not plead for forgiveness. The horror of it seemed too great for words. He was heartsick with compassion and shame.

Unworthy! With this word on his lips, he went away. Betty's eyes followed him as he went. When the door closed upon him, she turned and looked steadily at the two women, as if she were seeing them for the first time.

"What have you done to us? Oh, God, do you see what you have done to us?"

The anguish in her voice and in her wide eyes held them silent.

IX

Love is not an event—something that happens; it is an aptitude for intimacy.

Torpichen felt that the hours and the days were binding them together. Often her mere presence sufficed. It did not matter what she said or did. It was enough that she was Lamia, sitting near him in the sunlit garden of the Villa Corinte, or pacing the path by the Judas tree.

Their intimacy, which began in laughter and impertinence, had grown into a state of tyranny. For him and for her there was a tyrannic need of being together. He would bid her good-by in the garden as dusk fell, and drive back to his hotel; but before he had changed for the evening, he would call her up on the telephone, insisting she must dine with him that night, and that he had sent his car for her.

Always she would come. Sometimes she would be laughing and rebellious; sometimes she brought with her a gray mood of silence; but always she came. Her mood did not matter. Behind the laughter or the silence was Lamia.

There were wild night rides into France, or to Albergo and on to Savona. The night was empty, save for the cold air rushing to meet them and the glimmering white villages on the hillsides. They were together and alone in an empty world.

Over them the ebony of space was masked with azure and stars; and the azure was like a sheet of paper upon which their destiny was sketched in outlines of planetary fire. Neither of them sought to read it. They were absorbed in a present so actual and compelling that there seemed to be no longer any past or future.

For Torpichen, even her past was abolished. It had never existed, or, at most, it had been a fugitive dream of pale adventures, through which she had wandered, searching for him—only for him.

And she, too, had been the woman of his dream. Always he had known that somewhere on earth she existed — somewhere — waiting — a woman made wholly like the woman of his dream. Ardent, filled with laughter and little cries, or wrapped in silence and discretion, always she had existed—this woman for whom he represented all happiness.

How well he had known this woman of his dream, her nature, her aptitudes, her hidden aspirations, the light of her eyes and the flavor of her mouth! Now they had met somewhere in the ebony of space, and she was she—Lamia.

"You are not cold, Lamia?"

"With you?"

She leaned slightly against him, laughing softly.

In the morning he would call again to her over the telephone, or send the chubby Marwick with a note to her.

"Did you sleep well?"

"I dreamed beautifully."

"You must tell me about it."

"Yes—perhaps."

"Where shall we go to-day?"

"Does it matter? Anywhere."

"Badalucca?"

"No—I never want to see it again. There were so many priests, it looked like a rookery."

"I'll think of something. Be ready in an hour!"

"Two hours!"

"One!"

"Two!"

"One—it's wasting life when we are not together!"

They explored the sheep paths that led to far-away chapels, she on a swift-footed mule, he walking by her side, his hand on the saddle horn. In some dingy inn or other they found always luncheon of a sort—a dish of macaroni drenched with crimson sauce, a fowl, olives, pale wine; and the hours knit them together.

Torpichen knew that he loved her—her long, white body from head to heel, her eyes, her mouth; but that was something he had experienced more than once. Many women had turned the art of their sex on him, and he was not afraid of it. What held him more firmly was the overswing of the woman—he did not know what to call it—her soul, perhaps, the mystery she had brought with her into life from that strange unknown world whence we all come.

They were motoring along the Poggio road in the sunlight—the dancing sunlight, in which the mountains and the sea were like phantoms of themselves. Only the fat back of Marwick at the wheel, and the occasional squawk of his horn, made the hour real. Lamia was lying back in her corner of the car, sensuously silent. Andrew knew in some obscure way that under her half-lowered eyelids she was studying his face.

"We've known each other a long time!" he said.

"Ages!" she replied. "Ever since we were shark and shark—you remember once saying that? Tell me some more—something rather nice."

"There's plenty more to tell. Do you see those trees over there? In just such a bit of fire-swept woodland I once caught you, in one of our long-agos. Your hair was tousled by the wind and stained by the weather. Around your waist you had the pelt of a yellow beast. Your skin was saffron-colored, with flecks of star dust in it, and on your back and shoulders it was tanned brown by the sun. When I caught you by the arm, and held you fast, you snarled, showing your sharp teeth. Your mouth was red and wet, for you had been gorging on purple berries. When I snatched you up in my arms—"

Lamia pushed him away, laughing.

"Perhaps Marwick wasn't with us then," she said; "or was he?"

"Do you know what you are doing now? You are putting into your eyes that look of utterly impossible innocence. It's absurd, but I suppose it has become second nature. I dare say you practised it even when you were a shark. That's better—I like your eyes when they are angry!"

"Perhaps that other is the real look," she observed. "You wouldn't know—or would you?"

"Since we have been playmates for a million years or so, I am probably beginning to know a little bit about you."

"It's a strange theory, but it explains a great deal."

"It explains everything," he declared; "our being here together to-day, and—"

"And what? Go on!"

"Do you not know?"

They were passing the ruined church of San Sebastiano, and she turned and looked at it thoughtfully.

"I wonder," she went on mysteriously, "what that priest thinks of me!"

"What priest? Oh, you mean the *padre*—the old man whom we met that day as he was coming out of the church."

"I wonder what he thinks of me," she persisted. "I wonder what he has heard."

He did not ask her what there was to hear. He was keeping out of his mind every thought that did not abet their intimacy. There was scope enough for his cynicism without knowing what there was to hear about her.

"You are of his church?" he asked.

"Yes—or I was when I was anything."

"That explains his interest in you."

"He stared at me."

"That, too, was natural."

"I'm afraid of that priest!" she whispered, perhaps to herself.

She crouched back in the corner of the car. After a while she spoke again:

"You see, you never know what may happen. Anything can happen to me—anything! You know, or perhaps you don't, because it was before you came, at least—"

"Before we met?"

"Yes. One day I went to Taggia, up yonder. I was alone. It was terrible. I went alone through a forest. After Taggia there was a bridge, and then a mountain, and a stony road going up it to a chapel, where the Madonna is—the Madonna of Lampedusa. She is made of marble. So are her eyes—just marble; but every one told me—Grazia told me, and all the peasants know about it—that every now and then the eyes move. Hundreds of people have seen it in the last eighty years. That is why I climbed the mountain to Lampedusa. There were a few old women in the chapel, and a beautiful boy with black hair, kneeling near the altar. I approached, and looked up at the Madonna, and her eyes moved. They glanced slowly to right and left, and then, at last, they looked down on me—with pity, pity!"

Her voice died away. Then, suddenly, she said:

"They all saw it. The boy fell down on his face, and cried '*Miracolo, miracolo!*' I could only look into the Madonna's eyes, and the wonder of them, and their pity. Then they filmed over and were stone again. I saw it—with my living eyes I looked into her living eyes. You see, anything can happen to me—anything!"

Torpichen was very quiet, watching her. More and more, he was learning to understand her swiftly changing moods, as she flitted from sunlight to shadow. He waited until she herself broke the silence. She laughed a little, as if in self-mockery.

"I saw it," she persisted. "If you will go there too—"

"I should see it, I am sure. People who go to see a miracle always see a miracle. A wise man said that—Erasmus."

"I don't know him; but that would only mean you must be worthy of a miracle, or it won't happen for you. Isn't that it?"

"Yes—there are certain people to whom spiritual things happen. I suppose all superior women are like that. They know things that other women do not even dream of, and that men never suspect them of knowing. It isn't wisdom. It isn't knowledge. It is something older and deeper. It is a mystic heritage."

"Then you do believe the Madonna's eyes moved?"

"For you—yes, they moved for you."

"There are little men up there in the hills. Grazia declares she has seen them. One of them slipped into her room at night. He was what they call a *folletto*. He was green, like a tree. All the peasant girls know about them. They are not human men, you know, but terrible little creatures like fauns. Grazia knew a girl—"

She was launched on a story; and Lamia told it deftly. A young girl in one of the stone villages in the hills was in her bed, at night. The window was barred, because the girl thought she had caught a glimpse of a little green man in the woods above Oreana. Her mother slept on the other side of the door, and the girl felt that she was quite safe. She had taken off all her day clothes, as the peasants do up there, and was lying on her bed, wrapped in a linen sheet, with a blanket over her.

Suddenly she started up. In spite of the heavy wooden bars that held it, the window was swinging open. Then a little man thrust his head in. His eyes were like cups of green fire. He had a red mouth and a sharp-pointed yellow beard, and his hair was the color of flax. He laughed silently and wagged his head, and the girl was so terrified that she could neither scream nor move.

At last the little man sprang into the room. He was dressed in rusty green clothes that looked like the bark of a tree. His hands were very long, and his little legs were crooked and thin. He leaped upon the bed, and still the girl dared not scream. She could not even struggle.

For a long time she did not dare to tell any one, not even her mother or the priest. At last her baby was born, and it had thin, crooked legs and yellow hair on its head.

"It often happens up there in the hills. When a girl meets a *folletto*, especially at twilight, nothing can save her," Lamia concluded. "Grazia has told me, and the peasants know."

"Fauns and satyrs!" mused Torpichen. "They have outlived empires and religions. Why not? They are like the miracles—if you believe in them, they are. So long as there is one girl of Oreana who believes in the little green man, and sees him in the dusk under the chestnut trees, he will surely leap through her window at night."

Lamia laughed.

"I think you believe almost everything—as I do," she said.

"I am acquiescent," he replied. "I take what comes; but I don't know that it is wise. It would be safer for girls not to believe in satyrs. As I said, if they were not believed in, they would not break through bedroom windows."

X

A VALLEY with dark trees called to them. They left the motor car and struck off into a footpath, which dipped and then climbed the ragged side of a hill. They caught glimpses of roofs and towers. Then the woods covered them, and unexpectedly the narrow path led them into a little stone village, with an open square and arcaded streets.

There was an old church, and, next to it, an inn, with huge green branches nailed up over the door — the bush that proclaims good wine. In front of the church and the inn was a crowd of peasants, the men in white shirt sleeves, black-trousered, black-waistcoated, with heavy black hats on their heads; the women wide-skirted, with gaudy blouses and kerchiefs. Children swarmed in and out of the crowd like maggots, and well-nigh as naked.

Lamia and Torpichen were crossing the square when abruptly she caught his arm and drew him back into the shade of the arcade.

"Look!" she whispered.

Towering above the throng of excited,

gesticulating hill people rose the black-robed figure of the old *padre*. Lean, erect, with bared head, he stood there in the shadow of the old church. He was not looking at them. His steady eyes were staring down at a girl who stood, drooping, before him, a little in front of the crowd of peasants.

"He has not seen us," Torpichen said.

"Seen us? Of course he has seen us!" Lamia exclaimed impatiently. "He always sees us!"

Whether Father Testevi had seen them or not, he gave no sign.

Always his eyes were on the girl. She was a Ligurian, well formed, with strong legs and black eyes.

"Come, now," the *padre* was saying. Though he did not glance over toward the arcade where Lamia lurked in the shadow, with her hand on Torpichen's arm, yet he raised his voice, and it rang across the silent square. "Come, now—tell me once more."

"I saw the *folletto*, the *folletto*, the *folletto!*" she cried in a shrill voice.

She threw back her head and raised her hands in a wild gesture. The throng of hill people swayed and eddied. One woman wailed aloud—she was the girl's mother. A young man, cursing, tried to force his way forward to where the maid stood, but men's hands hauled him back.

"Quiet, all of you!" the *padre* commanded, and the peasants were still. Then he asked: "Where did you see him?"

"Above the *torrente*. He came down from the rocks, from the old city, the dead city, from the ruins!"

"Bussano!" shouted some one in the crowd.

"Bussano, Bussano!" repeated scores of voices.

The girl's terror seemed to have been consumed by a vehement need of justifying herself.

"Could I help it?" she shrilled. "I was coming up from the water, and he came leaping down the rocks. He leaped like a goat, but when he walked his feet dragged, and he hobbled—"

"*Folletto! Folletto!*" cried voices from the crowd.

"He was dark and green—a little man with eyes like fire. He called to me, and I ran and ran, but he kept calling that he would come at night—that he would come to me at night!"

Again the mother wailed, and other women took up the note, high-pitched like the howl of a nocturnal animal. The young man muttered.

Always the *padre* watched the girl with pale, unmoving eyes.

"Save me, *padre!*" she implored, and fell on her knees, sobbing. "For the love of Mary Mother, save me!"

The *padre* stooped and touched her shoulder.

"Stand up, Annunziata," he said gently. "Go into the church and pray. Wait there for me. Go with her, you—all of you." He motioned toward the church door. "In a moment I shall come to you."

The girl went droopingly, followed by her mother, into the church. The women and some of the men followed her. Others slipped aside into the tavern.

The stone square was nearly empty when the *padre* strode across it, his old cassock flapping to his stride, his huge flat hat swinging in his hand.

Torpichen would have advanced to meet the priest, but Lamia, whispering "No, no!" held him back. Then, with a swift change of mood, she went forward.

"How delightful to meet you here, father!" she exclaimed, smiling up at him.

Torpichen watched her with cynical eyes. He had seen that smile before. It was the same that she had bestowed upon the half naked blacksmith, looming out of the fire and smoke of his forge.

"How d'ye do, Mr. Torpichen?"

"Good day, father."

The two men looked each other straight in the eye. It was the younger man who looked away first.

"Did she really see the *folletto?*" Lamia asked breathlessly. "Oh, father, was she telling the truth? Are there really *folletti*—things like that?"

The priest smiled.

"I am not wiser than two ecumenical councils," he replied, "in which it was decided that these strange creatures really exist—creatures midway between mankind and the animal world. The soulless men, they were called—fauns, satyrs, Cabiri. For thousands of years humanity has had to reckon with them—here in these hills—everywhere. They were not always wicked. It was not so much that. It was their terrible wisdom that made them dangerous to the race of man, which has never been very wise. Wisdom is not human," the priest went on, and always he smiled. "It is animal—and divine. That is an old truth of which we've lost sight in these days of the deification of man; and that is why we've got the kind of civilization we have now—cerebral charlatanism on top, riotous helotism below, and wisdom nowhere, because we have lost touch with the source of wisdom, which is animal and divine."

"Yes," admitted Torpichen negligently; "quite true."

"What are you going to do for that girl?" asked Lamia, with great directness.

"She? She is safe now," the *padre* affirmed quietly.

"But since she saw the *folletto*, he will come to her. Every one says so," Lamia insisted. "He will come to her—at night! Or will he?"

"The father will exorcise her," Torpichen put in. "He will cast out the evil spirit. '*Exorcizote*'—isn't that it?"

"Why not?" the priest asked calmly. "The church is always casting out devils. It is continually saving women," he added, "and men—saving them from each other, and from the things that run about in the night."

A little shudder crept over Lamia, she did not know why. The priest was kindly, and seemed to be talking merely out of courtesy, but her fear of him stirred once more. She faced him, however, smiling resolutely.

"The wind is rising," the *padre* said irrelevantly. He looked upward toward the hills. "Do you feel the chill in the air? There is snow on the Alps."

Lamia went closer to him. She did not like this priest. She feared him; but it was impossible for her not to try to please him. Torpichen knew it well enough. The need of pleasing men was embedded in her nature as a triangle is in a circle. Blacksmith or bishop, he or another, it was all one. For the moment she was bent upon conquering the suave antipathy of this old priest, who, in spite of his austere eyes and black-gowned body, was a man.

"We are going to have luncheon in this little inn, father," she said. "You will come with us?"

She was urgent, and as pretty as a child; and the Jesuit met her mood with an elegance more worldly than her own. No, he could not go with them, but he thanked her in the right way, and chatted exactly the proper length of time, before he bowed and left them—striding away to the church, where Annunziata waited for him to deliver her from the demon whose eyes were like cups of fire.

Torpichen looked at Lamia with the quizzical look one gives to an actress or a performing dog.

"Why do you look at me like that?" she asked, and questioned him with shallow, innocent eyes.

"In what way?"

"As if you were criticizing me."

"I'm not. I'm rather admiring you. I'm wondering."

"What?"

"What might happen if you met the *folletto*—I mean to him."

"I think you are trying to be unkind," she returned, after a pause; "but I refuse to quarrel."

"Before luncheon?"

"Or afterward. Come!"

They sat down at a table in a vine-covered arbor, screened from the road and from the windows of the inn by the heavy foliage that inclosed it. They ate of the peasant food and drank the pale wine, but the *folletto* would not let them go. He crept into their talk. He danced among the dishes on the table.

"You're quite mad about him," Torpichen said.

"It is only what Grazia told me—and the peasants. He is not one—there are many, many of them."

She said they were surprisingly bright little men, with yellow beards and hair. She was sorry for them.

"Just think how sad it must be when one of those poor little men falls in love with a girl of the hills, like Annunziata," she went on, leaning across the table toward Torpichen, and speaking half seriously. "The poor little animal who is almost a man, dark and green like a tree, with his yellow beard and shining eyes and crooked legs—running after her and screaming his poor wildwood love. And you know," she added mysteriously, "in the twilight, in the awful twilight when there is neither sun nor moon, they are so ardent that nothing can stop them—not the sign of the cross, not the Agnus Dei. Always their coming foretells a disaster, and that is why the girls lose faith."

She spoke with a sort of semisincerity that Torpichen did not like.

"The *padre* will know how to protect

Annunziata," he remarked. "I am sure he has all sorts of potent spells. He will lay one of them on the little man and send him back to his lair."

"It's in the ruined city—that's where he hides."

"Want to go and look for him?"

She nodded, and watched him.

"It's a bit of a climb."

"I don't mind," she said carelessly.

After they set out, she showed neither fatigue nor hesitation, though the tramp was a hard one. They came down to the Corniche road, and below it, east of the little torrent of the Arma, they found a rough path that bore away to the north and wound up the ridge. It was a lean and bony path, ribs of stone showing through its earthy skin; but Lamia did not falter, though now and then she clung to him.

Once he snatched her up in his arms, and carried her over a very rough place. She laughed when he put her down, and they rested there and smoked cigarettes.

When they reached the top of the ridge, they saw the sun low-lying in the west. It was a huge pale sun, round and yellow as the turban of a negro king. Over it hung faint, shadowy clouds; and where they stood, high above the sea, the wind from the hills blew colder. They remembered that the *padre* had said there was snow on the Alps.

For a long while they stood gazing on the scene that spread before them. Then they continued their climb until in front of them, dead white against the sky, lay the ruins of old Bussano. It had been a stately little city, with battlements and towers and walls. One night, forty years ago, an earthquake had shaken it, tossed it, and let it fall into chaos and death. From where they stood, it looked like a living city with walls and towers and palace roofs. Within, they fancied, there might be hearth fires and voices; but as they drew near, they saw that it was a mausoleum covering the dead who had perished in the earthquake.

Amid the crumbling palaces a church tower lifted its head, as if proclaiming its immortality; but in a little while, they knew, it would go the way of all the rest, and there would remain only a heap of stones to mark the place where once Bussano was.

Over rocks and the scurf of vegetation they picked their way to what had once been one of the city gates. They made out the streets, running straight toward the public square, where a fountain had tossed up its water into the air. To the left was an old house, hollow, eviscerated, but with dingy silk rags still fluttering from the upper windows. It lay in the shadow. Indeed, a strange kind of darkness seemed to have taken possession of the ruined town.

"Shall we go in?"

"No, no!" Lamia said, drawing closer to him. "I do not want to go in."

"It looks interesting," Torpichen urged; "and, after all, that's what we came for, isn't it? I should like to see that church. They say that when the city fell the altar stood, untouched, unbroken, and—"

Lamia suddenly caught his arm.

"Look, look!" she cried. "There, in that house to the left—the window—there is some one there!"

It was the shell of a house, roofless, with naked windows.

"There is nothing," Torpichen replied.

"I tell you I see him—the little man! It is he, the little green man whom the girl saw. He is looking at me now!"

"It is some stranger like ourselves—a visitor," Torpichen told her. "Control yourself."

"You see him?"

"Yes, yes—just a man."

In a naked window of the hollow house—the shell without stairs or floors—high above earth, a dark little figure stood, outlined against emptiness. It was a twisted figure of a man, with bent knees and one hand outstretched.

"He is looking at us!" Lamia repeated, fear echoing in her words. "He is looking at you, as well as at me. My God!"

Even as she spoke that last word, the thing vanished. Where he had stood, crouching, there was only emptiness. It was as if the little man had instantly disappeared from the world of visible things.

"It is a warning. It means disaster. Something terrible is going to happen!"

"Nonsense!" Torpichen said, trying to steady her. "That was some wandering peasant. He was not at all like the green man the girl described."

"Whatever he was," Lamia whispered in a trembling, unsteady voice, "he was something inhuman — neither animal or man. Oh, I tell you something awful is going to happen! It has come as a warning, I know!"

As she spoke, she turned toward him a face the color of white ashes.

XI

It was another day.

She was in the darkening garden of the villa. She came to him through the swords of the yuccas, smiling quietly, accepting his presence without greeting or surprise. A long cloak covered her from throat to heel.

"I've been listening to the bells," she said.

He, too, had heard them. Always in the twilight the vesper bells rang softly far away. Clinging to the bell ropes, monks and lay brothers sowed the notes of the Angelus over the town, over the sea, over the old stone cities on the hills.

"And then I waited for you," she added.

"All this time?"

"Yes, and I watched the night come. Do you know the stars? I used to know many of them, but I've forgotten. We must go in."

In the salon she left him alone for some time. He heard her swift steps as she ran up the stairs. He waited without impatience. When she came again, she would not be, he knew, the woman who had met him in the dim garden. That was her way. She might bring tears or laughter, but she would not be the same; she never was.

In fact, when she reappeared, she was laughing happily. Her evening dress, a greenish rag with jewels, gave her an unfamiliar air.

"How charming you look!" he murmured, with undisguised admiration.

"You, too, look rather nice," she told him. "Now take me in to dinner!"

The dining room was cool and dim, lighted by tall wax candles at either end of the table. In the center of the table was a Tuscan jar with drooping roses. When they had taken their seats, she looked at it with disapproval, and pushed it to one side.

"I do not want anything to come between us to-night—not even flowers," she said.

They were served by the dark butler and by Grazia, a square girl, with handsome square face, which was pleasant to look upon as it came forward into the candlelight and then vanished into the brown shadows of the big room. In spite of the presence of the two attendants, they talked freely of what interested them most—themselves. She had told him that her servants did not understand English.

"Andrew is rather an angular name, isn't it? Yet perhaps it suits you," she said. "It is rugged and strong. When I first met you, I wondered what I should like your first name to be. I never thought of Andrew; but we won't change it."

"Nor Lamia."

"No? You like my odd name?"

"To-night especially. You are like something green and glistening that has crept out of a forest."

"It was my father who gave me that name. He used to think that, too—when I was a little thing."

"Lamia—Lamia!" murmured Torpichen softly. "Yes—I like it, and it suits you. I shall call you Lamia."

"If you like."

"There are many things about you, Lamia, that I should like to know," he remarked. "Perhaps you will tell me."

"I shouldn't mind," she answered indifferently; "but I don't remember much about myself — just patches. Parts have dropped out."

"I hope what you remember are the bright patches—the sunny places!"

"Oh, that! I suppose I do. People talk about life being like a river. I do not think of it that way. Mine has been like a lot of little rooms, each one separate. When I remember anything, it is like going into one of the little rooms and shutting the door. I can see only that one part. It's rather confusing, because I can't always tell where it really belongs, or what other room it opens into. But this is silly!"

"Indeed it is not! I only wish I had that kind of memory. I'd have just one room, with you in it."

"It might be monotonous," she replied carelessly.

The butler was changing the dishes. The ones he laid down were chipped and ill-treated, but wonderful for their soft colors. She showed Torpichen the mark on the under side of a biscuit boat—tumbling out the piled up biscuits on the table.

"It is real Capo di Monte, the old royal factory at Naples," she explained. "Think of leaving such things about in a furnished house! But then you know what the countess is."

She had taken the villa for six months. It belonged to the Countess Louvorsky.

Of course Torpichen knew her. Every one did. He smiled as a picture of her rose in his mind—a huge old woman being trundled up and down the promenade in a bath chair, by a melancholy footman in livery; a monstrous old woman, looking as if she might have been washed up, bleached and swollen, from the bottom of the sea.

" She was good to let me have the villa. I hate hotels. Anyway, she meant to be good."

Lamia broke off. The dessert was set out, and the servants left them alone in the shadowy room. She put one elbow on the table and made a hand rest for her chin. Leaning thus, she looked at him with the eyes she made for herself so often—eyes warm, naïve, pure as those of a little child.

Torpichen waited, confident that she was thinking of herself, and that sooner or later she would speak of herself. He rather envied her the faculty she had of seeing life in sunlit patches. Perhaps that kind of memory was granted to certain women, as a divine mercy, so that they could not, if they would, look back and see life as the terrifying thing it is—a living stream of hours and days and nights, moving relentlessly to its fated end.

He watched her across the faint veil of cigarette smoke that hovered between them.

" I am glad you spoke of my father," she said at last. " I never loved any one else, and no one ever talks of him. I loved him. It was in the Northwest. I can always hear the wind in the pines. They stood around our house on three sides, and stretched away for miles and miles. There was a great lake. Many of your Easterners have never seen a lake. It is an ocean, only wilder and swifter and stronger—and not sad, like salt seas. My father was a wonderful man. He came from Norway. He was bigger than any man I have ever seen. He was like a great tree, a part of nature, and he knew all her secrets. I loved my father!"

He made no comment, for he knew she was speaking less to him than to herself.

" He used to take me into the forest, and I used to hide there, a little half naked thing. He called me his little wood snake, he named me Lamia—you know, because he said that some day I would turn into a woman, as in the old, old story."

" I remember the story," Torpichen interposed. " It is in a poem, isn't it? The young man is on his way to Corinth, and Lamia glides out of a dusky brake and bewitches him—I remember. She was a woman, or a serpent—"

" Rainbow-sided, touched with miseries," she murmured softly. " I know it by heart. Are you afraid?"

" Of witchcraft?" he asked. " Of you? I think not!"

She laughed in her abrupt way—a hard little laugh—and stood up.

" We shall have coffee in the other room," she said. " You can smoke here a while over your wine. I shan't be very long."

He opened the door into the brilliantly lighted hall. As she passed out, she caught a glimpse of herself in a mirror. She ruffled her hair and turned to him.

" I look horrible," she said.

" You look cold," he answered.

A gray kind of pallor had come into her face, and her eyes were dull. He watched her go up the curving stairs. She went slowly, with relaxed muscles. Halfway up, she turned and gave him a little smile.

" She won't come down again," he thought.

He wondered why she had gone to pieces like that. He tried to remember what they had said. Perhaps what disturbed her was her recollection of her father.

He went into the salon, and waited there. He had a sense of selfish safety, for he told himself that he was not afraid of her witchcraft, or of her strange beauty, which seemed to come and go.

Like other men, Torpichen had had sentimental adventures. What he had loved in women, he realized, was something he put there himself. He had loved an image that he had himself created. He had built up dream women, and had seen them, one by one, crumble into ashes. That was love—a little glory and a little dust.

And his love for Lamia — did it differ from the others? What disquieted him was not the flaming intensity with which this new love had seized him. It was the tenderness in it—the aching tenderness that made him wish to shield her.

Nearly half an hour had elapsed before she came again. She was wearing some sort of tea gown, a greenish, trailing thing. A long string of opals hung from her neck, and on her fingers were opal rings. The gray mood had gone quite away from her. Her eyes were radiant with a sort of blue light, and there was a flush in her cheeks. It was as if, during her absence, she had drunk of life from a cup—a new, sweet life, violent as poison. Torpichen recognized the faint odor of ether.

She touched his hand as she displayed the opals.

"I love them more than any of the others," she said, "because they need me most. If I lay them away, even for a few days, they turn dim and sickly."

She crouched down by the hearth and fed them with firelight. She flashed and glittered there in all her ardent beauty.

He thought of things supple and bright and dangerous—of the Mozarabian sword with which one could strangle a bull—of the rainbow-sided thing, eyed like a peacock, that glided from the forest of the legend.

"Lamia!" he whispered.

She was more than a woman whom he loved. She was magic and mystery and peril. She was the woman of his desire, for whom he had fought throughout the years—through the thousand lives they had loved and plotted together.

When he whispered her name, she turned toward him. The light of the fire and of the jewels was reflected in her eyes. Her lips were half open. He held out his arms.

Sinuous and swift, she rose in one rippling movement, and went to him. She waited until his arms inclosed her. Then, raising her face, she gave him her mouth.

He held her to him in a close embrace, repeating gently again and again:

"I love you—love you—love you!"

"I know!" she answered. "I know that you love me; and I know my own heart—Andrew!"

"The joy of loving you, Lamia!" he murmured. "To love you—to be alone with you—utterly alone with you—through the long years, loving you—loving you!"

She clung to him very close, as if she were taking refuge in his strength and in his love. Again their lips met in a kiss that seemed to blot out the world.

Neither heard the door open. Neither heard a step on the floor. It was a sneering little laugh that woke them.

Lamia, cowering away from him, screamed aloud; and Torpichen, turning, saw Prince Kurokin.

The Russian stood there, his hands in the pockets of his long fur coat. Motionless he stood, but his handsome face was savage with fury—a sneering, Slavic fury that gave him the look of an animal with bared fangs.

"You!"

Lamia spoke at last. Her courage came back, and she confronted him.

"Is it not time I came—home?" Kurokin said. "You must have been lonely! Or perhaps you have not been lonely?"

Ostentatiously he ignored Torpichen, but it was evident that he recognized in him the man with whom he had quarreled at Monte Carlo. He went to Lamia, laid his hand upon her shoulder—a proprietary hand—and leered into her face. Still holding her, he wheeled and faced Torpichen.

"Who is this, pray?" he asked Lamia insolently.

Torpichen answered the question, giving her no opportunity to speak. One glimpse he had had of the horror in her face as Kurokin took possession of her, and then he had lowered his eyes. He could not watch her suffer. He realized that there was nothing he could do that would not add to her pain.

One thing alone he knew clearly—he must keep control of himself. He must do nothing until he discovered what she wished him to do. When, at last, he spoke, he was glad to find that his voice was steady.

"I am Mr. Torpichen," he said quietly. "I am a friend of Miss—"

"Of my wife!" Kurokin broke in. His hand was still on Lamia's shoulder, but it was toward Torpichen that he turned his sneering face as he repeated: "My wife!"

So sudden was the shock that Torpichen hardly realized it, just as a man may be struck by a fatal bullet and stand wondering if he is wounded. It was Lamia who cried out. She freed herself and went toward him.

"It is a lie!" she said coldly. "That man has lied! I am not his wife!" Head high, defiant anguish in her eyes, she looked Torpichen full in the face, and added: "I am his mistress!"

For a moment Torpichen did not speak. He stood motionless, staring into her white face. Then, in a voice as cold as her own, he said: "Good-by," and left the room, thrusting the butler away from the half open door.

The voice of Kurokin followed him in a mocking farewell.

(To be continued in the December number of MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE*)*

Gossamer

THE STORY OF A WOMAN WHO WANTED ROMANCE IN HER LIFE

By Anna Blake Mezquida

THE Thorpe house, square, massive, standing on a little rise above the Passaic, looked down across the river upon the Thorpe Soap Works, solidly squat among the belching factories of Newark. To Janet Thorpe the river was beautiful — swift-flowing, mysterious, reflecting in its changing moods the shifting whimsies of the sky; but the factories—ugh! She hated them—particularly the Thorpe Soap Works. She shut it from her sight whenever she could.

It was shut out now. Within the house was twilight—the twilight of drawn gray shades at noon. The air was weighted with the fragrance of flowers, a heavy sweetness suggestively funereal. Through the shuttered, scented dimness there filtered little catches of breath and sobs—Janet holding her lonely ritual of grief on this second anniversary of her baby's death.

John Thorpe, the child's father, would not have understood. For a brief time following the day when the limp little body had been brought in from the roadside where a passing automobile had hurled it, John Thorpe had been like a man stunned. Then, with the abrupt squaring of shoulders which his wife so well knew, he had flung his mourning from him and gone back to life and the living—to his soap works, his employees, and his friends—to routine and pleasure, dragging Janet with him through the old meaningless round of theaters and dinners, though he knew that her heart was breaking.

She had vague moments, at first, of realizing that he did it out of kindness—that he felt it was not well for her to grieve. He was so sane, so practical, in resisting the inroads of emotion!

Janet did not want to resist. Her father's and mother's lives had been molded along those stern lines of common sense, and their marriage had been a drab and unbeautiful monotone. Against such an existence Janet's dreamy, imaginative nature beat rebelliously, like the fettered wings of some wild thing. This feeling of hers had played its part in the idealistic love she had lavished upon her child, and in the abandonment with which she mourned him.

It did not occur to her that she might be sentimentalizing her sorrow in keeping Theo's room just as he had left it — his playthings scattered about the floor, his little suits hung in neat rows in the closet, his rompers and underclothes in neat piles in the drawers. The bed was still tumbled, as he had risen from his nap; the dent was still in the pillow where his brown curls had rested. All—all was just as it was on that fatal day when, laughing mischievously, he had escaped from his nurse and run across the road to death.

Janet went over to the bed and lifted the enveloping cover that protected it from dust. She dropped to her knees and laid her head against the bed rail; and there, one cold hand pressed in the round hollow in the pillow, she broke into subdued but passionate weeping.

There would never be another soft little rose-leaf body to nestle in that bed—or in any other. The doctor had made that cruelly plain; and John knew. He had been a doctor himself for two glorious years before the accident to his hand turned him from his profession into his uncle's soap works.

Never another child but Theo—and Theo was dead!

It seemed strange, terrible, to Theo's mother that Theo's father could not understand. On the first anniversary of their boy's death he had shown that queer lack of comprehension. Janet had been mourning in the little room, much as she was doing now, when John burst in, big and breezy from out of doors, holding by the hand a dirty young ragamuffin, whom he introduced gayly as—

"My pal, Bill Connelly, Janet. Lives down the other side of the road. He says he has never ridden a rocking-horse, and I told him we had one. There it is, sonny!"

He pushed the grinning urchin toward Theo's steed, standing pathetically lonely in the corner. To Janet he had added:

"If there are any of Theo's clothes—"

"No, no, no!" she had panted, not meaning to be unkind.

She took the boy's chubby paw and dragged him out and down the stairs. She rifled the cake box and the fruit dish for him. She thrust into his astonished hands the costly bronze statuette of a fisher boy that stood in the hall—anything to save that desecration of Theo's room and things!

Through it all John had regarded her curiously—a little rebukingly, she felt. He had not understood.

It flashed through her mind that it would have been different with Revell Alanson. Revell would have poured upon her bruised heart sympathy soft and sensitively comforting as a woman's. He had always known so exquisitely how to give what he should give.

At times like this the wild, transient flame of his passion for her flared up, flinging shadows across her life with John. Looking back from her prosaic, well ordered world, that brief passage with Revell stood out as romance.

Once, oddly enough, she had fancied that John was romance. That dated back from childhood's days in San Francisco, when her home, the old Drury place, standing in aristocratic grandeur on the hill, looked scornfully down upon the Thorpe cottage, backed impudently against the terraced gardens, spilling shouting youngsters into the tangled mess of greenery which they called their "back yard."

The cottage had been a thorn in the flesh of Janet's parents; but Janet, the rebel, had adored both it and the Thorpes —especially young John Thorpe, of the eager gray eyes, the ruffled brown hair, and the marvelously clever hands that could fashion water wheels and dolls and no end of things.

It had all been surreptitious, of course, when Janet's mother and nurse were off guard. Otherwise she lived by the book—food at just such an hour, of just such a kind, Fletcherized—naps begun and ended by the clock—music lessons, dancing lessons, history lessons, in orderly routine as uncompromising and deadly as the decalogue. There were no fairies in Janet's young life, save those of her own devising.

She used to say to John:

"Some day I'll jump upon a moonbeam and ride it to the stars!"

"And I'll be the man in the moon, and catch you before you reach the stars," John would answer.

There came the day when John Thorpe went away to a medical college, his eyes full of dreams, his heart full of hope, and his white young soul burning with the fever of accomplishment. To Janet it was the more wonderful because she knew that he was working his way through college, and at the same time was contributing to the support of the frail, drooping mother.

In these days he and Janet did not speak of love, though it throbbed in their breasts and flung scarlet banners from their cheeks; but on the day when John hung out his shingle beside old Dr. Porter's, he told her. He told her, too, that he would not bind her until he was in a position to marry her. He gave her his love and left her free.

Then, just when he was beginning to make a name for himself among the younger surgeons, came the accident to his right hand, and an infection necessitating an operation that crippled him.

"I shall never operate again," he said quietly.

He took down his shingle and wired his uncle in Newark that he was coming on, as that good man wished, to enter the soap works. To Janet it had been a shock—not alone the injury to John's hand, but his easy acceptance of the soap works, and his refusal to cling to his profession and to see if time would not limber the injured fingers, as Dr. Porter predicted it might.

It was not practical to wait, John said. If he did not join his uncle now, some one else would. He needed money. His dreams? Well, he would dream about soap!

II

It was a year after John went to Newark that Janet met Dr. Alanson. He was a friend of her brother-in-law, Dr. Stowell, Louise's husband. She met him at a moonlight garden party at Del Mar, the summer colony where her sister had her home.

Janet had had a letter from John that day—all soap—no gossamer threads of romance. Revell Alanson had exuded romance from his handsome, foreign-looking face, his dark Spanish eyes, his low, vibrant voice, which dripped poetry and admiration without making it sticky. He had been everywhere and seen everything; yet he subtly made Janet feel that this hour in the moonlight would be a fragrance sweetening all his days.

Janet met him often after that. Each moment they were together was a pulsating, iridescent thing of loveliness. Then, one night, Revell failed her. He made a promise that he did not keep, and lied to cover his omission. It was not a big thing in itself, but it was enough to bring Janet back to sanity and John.

John could not come to get her, so she went to Newark and married him there unromantically, in the minister's house, with two strangers for witnesses.

That first year she had been unbelievably happy, even though the soap works demanded so much of John's time. Then Theo came, and Janet blossomed beneath her motherhood like some glorious, exotic flower; but fatherhood sat heavily on John, so that he gave himself more than ever to soap. A son meant to him practical things—money, clothes, schooling. He was taking over the works that year, after his uncle's death, enlarging it and increasing the personnel. He had big plans afoot, he explained, and they were jealous in their exactions.

He was tired and silent when he came home at night, his brows furrowed in thought, his body tense and still, as if gathering unto itself energizing force for the morrow; and Janet wanted to laugh and chatter foolish nothings, and to show him the newborn wonders of their baby boy.

John's remoteness hurt her at first, and then angered her. She even resented the little company hospital he had built, because he told her in his unmoved way that it made for efficiency to keep his workmen and their families in good health.

"You could go back to your profession now," she said to him once, when Theo was three.

The miracle that old Dr. Porter had prophesied had come to pass, and the impaired muscles of the injured hand were now as good as ever; but John did not care to go back. He had his soap works now. He told her so with a pleasant cheerfulness that held no dim lurkings of regret.

This second year since Theo's death John had been unusually full of business, full of success, full of the new country house that he was building. Janet and her grief lay in another world than his, so that she sometimes wondered if they could ever again find a bridge on which to meet.

Just now, as she knelt there beside Theo's little bed, it would be very easy for John to cross to her, did he but know. If he would come home to her this day, tender, understanding as of old, if he would pour out the balm of sympathy in some quiet word or touch, the cold numbness in her heart would melt and the sweet beauty of their love would come pulsing back.

III

The sharp slam of the front door informed her that John was there. It was Saturday afternoon, and he had come home early. He plunged up the stairs two at a time, calling breezily:

"Jan! Jan! Can you be ready in half an hour? We'll run out to Montelac for dinner." Montelac was their new country home. "I've asked a few friends—a little housewarming—"

She heard him pause at the door of her room.

"Where are you, Janet?"

Then he came on—a little more slowly, it seemed to her—to Theo's room. She waited for him, standing, the tears dried on her hot cheeks.

He stood just outside the door, looking at her. There was something wistful and yearning about him, vaguely expressive of dumb pain. Janet had an impulsive desire to slip her arms about him and to comfort him, as she would have comforted Theo.

Then he was saying in his calm, ordinary tone of voice, with a faint added note of rebuke:

"You're wearing yourself out with this sort of thing, Janet. It isn't wise."

Instantly she was on the defensive.

"I don't know that a mother thinks of wisdom when her heart is breaking!"

Again there was in his face that quivering something, with its suggestion of pain. Again it touched her disturbingly, only to slip away as he spoke.

"You forget that he was my son as well as yours."

"It's you who forget!" she flared.

It hurt her intolerably that she must fight him there in Theo's room. She moved to the door, closing it behind her, shutting herself out in the hall with him.

"Janet!" His light touch fell on her arm, but she shrank away, so that he dropped his hand. "Janet, you make death seem very cruel, and sorrow very selfish. There is something we owe to the living."

She gave a sharp, bitter laugh.

"Do you think we owe them a housewarming to-night?"

"No—not necessarily that. The housewarming is incidental." Incidental! She laughed again. "It's merely part of what we owe ourselves, you and I. Look here, Janet! I've had the dickens of a day, with a thousand things at the works needing attention; and then—I was operating over at the hospital."

"Operating?" Janet was startled. "I didn't know you operated now!"

"Have you ever cared much to find out what I do?" he flung back with a note of hardness. "Simpson was called out of town to-day. Ordinarily he runs the hospital, and I run the works. Each man to his job; but I make it part of mine to know when a man falls ill, or when his mind is a hundred miles from his work because one of his family is ailing. I've encouraged them to come to me about other things. It makes for efficiency." He paused. "But I can't give them the best of myself by day unless I get away from it all at night, and forget myself and my worries. It's the only way to keep fit."

Fit! Janet hated that cold, common sense word.

"If life is nothing but efficiency and fitness, then I'd rather be dead!" she thought. Out loud she said, with a wild desire to slash: "Revell Alanson managed to keep fit, as you call it, without sacrificing all the finer things of life. He could be sweet and thoughtful and tender—"

"To a beautiful woman! Yes — that's Revell."

John's tone was matter-of-fact rather than scornful, and for that very reason it stung her to fury.

"What do you know about Revell?"

"You forget that he was one of my instructors in surgery. Ah, Janet," he added amusedly, "I could understand your getting up some feeling if his tenderness had been the true-till-death kind; but he married Mary Atwood a month after you married me, didn't he?"

Blind fool not to understand that Revell had married Mary madly, recklessly, because he *did* love Janet! The proof was the fact that he had not been happy in his marriage. He and Mary had been on the point of a break at the time of Mary's death, Louise had written; but Janet was too proud to explain this to John.

Suddenly she was sick of the whole miserable discussion. It was hideous that she and John should be quarreling there, within Theo's hearing!

She put her hand dazedly to her head—it had been so real, for a moment, that Theo was in that room behind them. It terrified her a little. That came from living so much with his memory, alone. If only John—

"Do you realize, Janet," he was saying, "that this is the twentieth time this month you have flung Revell Alanson's name in my teeth? I've laughed it off before, but I'm not made of iron. It would be a very good thing if you could go out to California and see just how much Alanson means to you to-day. Then we should all know better how to proceed."

The color had drained from Janet's fair, delicate skin, leaving her blue eyes dangerously dark.

"Perhaps it would be a good idea," she agreed lightly.

She slipped past him down the hall to her room. At the door she looked back.

"There's a night train out, isn't there? You might wire Louise that I'm coming, while I drop a few things into my trunk. Don't forget to make my excuses to our friends at the housewarming!"

He answered with a surprising show of nonchalance.

"I think I'll close up house while you're gone," he said, "and take a room at the hospital—nearer the works daytimes and the theaters evenings."

That was all he cared! It was a deadlier insult than any outburst of anger.

IV

At her sister's house in Del Mar, Janet stepped into an atmosphere of contented geniality. Dr. Jim was big and beaming; Louise was placid and matronly. No rose flush of romance here — yet it somehow brought a dull ache to Janet's heart.

It was inevitable that sooner or later she should meet Revell Alanson, for he and her brother-in-law were partners in the handsome Del Mar Sanitarium, back in the hills. The god of romance, who had staged their first encounter in a garden, arranged this later meeting, not in Louise's placid home, but on the shore of the sea.

Janet had always loved the sea, and now there was something in the tireless surge of the waves that spoke to the restlessness in her breast. She was sitting on the sands, staring broodingly across the waters, when Alanson came sauntering along the beach, his hat in one hand, the other gripping the chubby fingers of his five-year-old son, who skipped and chattered at his side. He stopped to swing the boy up in his arms, and to point out a small lumber schooner laboring in the trough of the ocean.

As he stood there, his dark head bent above his son's, his lithe, graceful figure outlined against the red gold sky, a mist came over Janet's eyes, so that she did not know when he turned her way. She heard him saying, in his low, vibrant voice:

"I learned you were in town. I've been haunting the beach ever since, hoping I might run into you."

He remembered that she loved the sea!

He held out his son's chubby little paw to her.

"My boy, Reeve," he said.

The child looked up with one of his winning smiles. There was something in Janet's face, just then, that would reach out to any child.

"You are more fortunate than I, Revell," she said, with stumbling heart. "I lost my boy."

His eyes were weighted with sympathy.

"I know. My heart broke for you. I wanted to write, but I was afraid you might not understand. I feared you had never forgiven that one vile lie of mine. If you only knew how one little slip may ruin a man's whole life!" He caught his boy to him with quick, passionate possession. "The one beautiful thing I have saved out of the wreckage, Janet. He has made up to me for—many things."

It was flawless. Janet swayed to it like a reed touched by the wind.

They chatted commonplaces then, though Revell had the gift of making them seem not commonplace. Reeve darted away down the beach to where a tow-headed little boy was wading in the surf under the watchful eye of his mother.

"That's Mrs. Jansen, the woman who does washing for the hospital," said Revell, frowning slightly. "Reeve is wild to play with her boy, Ole—a David and Jonathan devotion which I am not encouraging."

Janet laughed.

"Oh, let them! They're only children."

"But, my dear Jan," he protested whimsically, "you should hear the Swede English that Reeve brings home! It's awful! Mrs. Jansen would do anything on earth for the child—more, I believe, than Mrs. Green, my housekeeper; but—" His shrug was delightfully expressive. "I'll give them a lift home in my car," he added; "and if you cared"—his eyes filled with appealing eagerness — "I'd like to show you the hospital."

It was a wonderful afternoon. Janet floated home on fanciful wings of beauty; so that Louise, looking at her, said in her pleasant, literal way:

"Something nice must have happened to-day."

"I met Revell on the beach, with Reeve," replied Janet. "The child is a darling, and Revell worships him."

Louise flashed her sister a sharp glance.

"Oh, yes!" she admitted slowly. "Revell adores him—after his own fashion. I used to think it rather mean, the way he plumed himself on being the youngster's favorite, rather than poor Mary. Reeve always was a 'father's boy.' There isn't anything he thinks his father can't do. I believe he imagines his father cures people by a mere laying on of hands. And let any one say anything against his father! Revell's friends do it, just to egg the child on. Reeve is a regular little Dempsey—fights 'em fists, heels, and teeth; and Revell swells up over it like a pouter pigeon. I think it's pathetic!"

Janet's eyes were dark and shining.

"*I* think it's beautiful!"

V

It was the beginning of Revell Alanson's renewed siege of the heart of the woman he had loved and lost. He was very adroit, very wise, and therefore doubly effective. There were casual visits to the Stowell house—more casual meetings on the beach, chaperoned by Reeve—social gatherings at homes where they were both invited.

Janet never forced these meetings, but she let herself be swept into them as irresistibly as driftwood is flung on the shore by ocean tides. She gave that impression, as the days slipped by. She was neither seeking nor withstanding, but drifting—borne on currents stronger than herself.

It must have worried the Stowells, for they took turns in speaking to her about it. Louise spoke first.

"You are making a fool of yourself over Revell," she warned. "Don't play with fire, Jan!"

Two hot spots burned in Janet's cheeks.

"Perhaps I *am* making a fool of myself—I've had to be sensible so long. Perhaps I *am* playing with fire; but I've had my fill of ashes."

"You are making a mistake, Janet. John is worth twenty of Revell. Things can't be so bad with you and John. He has always loved you."

"Don't deceive yourself! John has one love—the works!" Janet contradicted evenly. "Whatever love he had for me has been washed away with—soap!"

"There was Theo."

"Yes—there was Theo."

Suddenly she was pouring out all her pent-up misery into her sister's ears. Janet saw that Louise did not quite understand. At the end she repeated heavily, as if she had nothing new to offer:

"You are making a mistake, Janet."

Janet's brother-in-law got at her next.

"I'm not trying to butt in, Janet, but Revell Alanson—"

"You don't like him, do you," Janet interrupted, "even if he is your partner?"

Dr. Stowell flushed dully.

"Alanson's a clever operator, and he had the financial backing to make the hospital possible; but he's all surface. He's a dangerous man with women."

"Do you mean with women, or with one woman?" Janet thrust sweetly. Then she laid a penitent hand on her brother-in-law's arm. "You're such a big, blundering old dear, Jim! You mean awfully well by me, but I can't let you and Lou mark out my life by chart and compass." Her voice quivered with sudden passion. "I've never had the fairies, and I want them now. I want the kind of thing there is between Revell and his son."

"Just what do you mean?" Jim asked bluntly. "What do you intend to do?"

"Do? I don't know! I'm taking what life offers day by day. That's what a starving man does."

Jim Stowell did not understand any more than his wife had; but he wrote to John Thorpe—which Janet did not know.

Fate plays strange tricks sometimes without giving her victims any warning. On the night of the Townsends' dance, Janet heard the distant whistle of the Overland while she was in her room, dressing. She thought, in a careless, detached way, that the train was late; then her thoughts slipped softly into her own affairs.

It was at the Townsends' that she had first met Revell on that moonlight night seven years ago. Instinctively she knew that he had chosen this night to swing the charming *camaraderie* of the last few weeks to a climax. What might lie beyond this night she did not care to think. It was better just to live day by day, hour by hour.

The door opened and Louise came in, handsome and Junoesque in her black evening gown. Beside Janet's flushed, slightly tumbled loveliness, Louise had the dull perfection of a manikin.

"Jim had been called over to Cerito on a case," she announced. "Personally, I would rather not go to Mabel's—a jam like that, with the influenza spreading; but, of course, if you very much *care*—"

"Mabel has been mighty sweet to me, Lou. I don't see just how I can disappoint her at the eleventh hour."

"Oh, we won't be missed! I don't imagine Revell will be there," Louise added awkwardly, "with Jim gone and the hospital filling up."

"Possibly not."

Janet knew, however, that Revell *would* be there—for a while, at least; or he would have sent her some word, Revell fashion, in a box of roses.

"Janet, I think you are simply mad to play around this way with Revell," Louise burst out tactlessly. "John is a patient man, but he *is* a man. I should not like to try him too far. He was crazy to let you come!"

"Let me?" Janet scoffed. "He encouraged it!"

Louise ignored both the words and the tone.

"Do you know what he wrote Jim? That you thought of him as a plodder, a commonplace sort of duffer; but you remembered Revell as a *Sir Galahad*—poetry and moonlight in the garden. Gossamer!

He fancied that if you came back here and saw Revell as he is, after years of selfish living—"

"It is John who has lived selfishly," Janet cut in hotly. "Revell has given me things that John never has, or could."

"Nonsense!" Louise snapped. "You and John quarreled, and Revell was here at the psychological moment with his good looks, his charm, and—his boy."

Something flamed within Janet.

"Revell was here with his boy, and John was there with his soap works. Well?"

"I suppose there's no use in my saying anything more."

"I'm afraid there isn't, Lou."

VI

THE Townsends' big, old-fashioned garden had never been lovelier than on this moonlit night. There was something airy about it, mystic, entrancing, as if gauzy-winged elves lay hidden behind the flowers.

While the dance went on indoors, Revell sat with Janet on a rustic bench beneath the oleanders, his low voice a strain of music in her ears. A white-capped maid, blundering upon them, stopped him. Was he Dr. Alanson? Then he was wanted at the telephone.

With a muttered word he flung after the girl. He was still frowning when he came back.

"Ole Jansen has the flu—or his mother imagines he has. She was so frantic she couldn't talk straight."

Janet came out of her dream world.

"Poor thing! I'm so sorry!" She rose. "Don't wait a minute for me, Revell."

He laid a light, caressing hand upon her arm, and drew her down.

"My dear Jan, I'm not going. Stanyon, the house doctor, can look after the boy—or one of the interns. You didn't think I would leave you *now?*"

She slipped from under his hand with a hot disgust that surprised herself.

"I imagined a doctor would leave anything—for a sick child!"

"But, my darling girl! Mrs. Jansen always makes a mountain out of a molehill. Ole probably sneezed once, and she called it the flu."

"You don't *know!*"

His dark eyes were full of injury.

"You are unjust to me. You haven't given me my answer yet, and I couldn't go without some word."

She moved toward the house. He tagged behind foolishly.

"Where are you going?"

"To the hospital, to be with Mrs. Jansen. I know how anxious she must be."

"That's mighty dear of you, Jan!" His approbation seemed a trifle strained. "I'll run you over there and leave you while I drop home and get into working togs."

"Thanks, but Lou has her car."

"I'll see you at the hospital later, then."

He was gracefully making the best of it; but he wasn't going because he wanted to. He was going because *she* was going. She had the feeling that it was only to find another opportunity of making love to her. It made her a little sick.

It seemed to Janet that Louise took ages to get into her wraps and make her adieus, and she drove her car with aggravating slowness. She stayed outside while Janet went into the hospital.

Mrs. Jansen was in the reception room by the door, sagged together, her mild blue eyes misty with tears. Janet sympathetically touched the drooping shoulder.

"I'm so sorry! But keep a brave heart. Ole will pull through all right."

"It ban't Ole," Mrs. Jansen choked. "It bane Reeve."

"Reeve?"

"You see, he bane staying at my house all day wit' Ole, 'cause Mis' Gray vent veesiting her seester in Cerito. She know Dr. Alanson von't be home till late—"

"*Reeve?* When was he taken sick?"

"He bane pooty seek boy all day. Tonight he get bad seek, and I phone his papa at Mis' Townsend's—"

"He thought you were talking about Ole."

"I tell heem it ees Ole. I no vant scare heem until he get here. I yust tell heem come queek, but he say dat he can't leave, dat I go get Dr. Stanyon. Den I try explain it not Ole, but Reeve; but he yust ring off. So I wrap up Reeve and bring heem here—"

"Where is he now?" Janet said sharply.

Mrs. Jansen burst into low, agonized weeping. Janet patted her comfortingly.

"Don't cry! I'll find out from some one. I know it's all right."

In the office she found Miss Tait, the night superintendent.

"I'm Dr. Stowell's sister-in-law," she explained. "I came to ask about Reeve Alanson. Is it the flu?"

Miss Tait looked up from her charts.

"Pneumonia—both lungs. Thank God, Dr. Thorpe was here in time to put a drainage tube between the ribs!"

"Thorpe? Dr. Thorpe?"

"Yes—John Thorpe. It's a strange thing. Do you believe in Providence? I hadn't seen Dr. Thorpe for years, not since I was in training at the Children's Hospital in San Francisco. Then, of a sudden, he walks in here to-night, looking for Dr. Stowell or Dr. Alanson—I'm not sure which. They had just brought Reeve in, all choked up, poor kid! Dr. Stowell was over in Cerito, and we couldn't get Alanson by phone. Stanyon had been on the go all day, and was shaking with fever himself to-night. He couldn't operate, but Dr. Thorpe—"

"Did he know it was Dr. Alanson's boy?" Janet broke in.

"We told him, and—it was very strange—he acted, for a minute, as if he couldn't do it. 'If I operate,' he said, 'and the boy dies, Alanson will never understand. *She* will never understand.' I don't know what he meant. Then he said in his cool, calm way, 'Get him ready.' There was no time to lose."

Janet dragged her voice from some far-off place.

"Was—was the operation—"

"A success? Yes, but it will be nip and tuck for some time. They've just brought him down." She picked up the jangling telephone. "What's that, Dooling? You've raised him? Good!" She hung up the receiver. "We have reached Dr. Alanson at last," she explained to Janet.

There was a white, still look in Janet's face.

"When Dr. Thorpe is free, I should like to see him. I am Mrs. Thorpe."

If Miss Tait thought it odd, she made no sign.

"I think he's in Reeve's room now—No. 14, just down the hall. Wait—I'll take you. I want to tell him we've got Alanson." Outside the door she ordered: "Please stay here a minute."

She opened the big door gently. It swung slowly shut, not tightly, against the white cloth wound around the lock to keep it from slamming.

"Just coming to consciousness," came John's voice, solidly reassuring. "We'll pull him through." Then Janet heard him give a queer little sigh. "He makes me think of my boy—the boy I lost. Our little fellow had the same brown curly hair and big blue eyes, and he had laughing ways such as I fancy this youngster has when he is well. Something goes out here when your first-born dies."

Janet could almost see his strong, supple fingers resting upon his heart.

"Yes," Miss Tait said. "I keep thinking how terrible it would have been for Dr. Alanson if—" She broke off, and announced briefly: "We got him at last."

"Thank God!" John said. His voice dropped huskily. "When my boy died, his mother grieved so terribly that I was afraid she would lose her mind. I used to try and get her thoughts on other things, to keep her from brooding. I thought she might come to see that there were other children, *living*, who needed—"

"Mrs. Thorpe is here now, doctor."

Janet pushed open the door and went in. She saw the bed and the tumbled curls on the pillow, and John in the shadows beside a white-gowned nurse. She saw the nurse rise at some word from her superintendent. Then—she was alone with John and Revell's boy.

"I want my father!" a muffled wail rose pitifully. "My father!"

John leaned over the bed.

"Yes, sonny, he's coming. Your daddy will soon be here."

Janet moved across the room and laid a hand on her husband's shoulder. He reached up with his free hand and covered it, but he did not speak.

"*He* thought it was Mrs. Jansen's boy who was sick, and so he wouldn't come," she said chokingly. "He doesn't care for children—only his own. I found that out to-night, at Mabel's. He was there to make love to me, John—to persuade me to leave you. He didn't intend to come for Mrs. Jansen's boy. He doesn't care for children," she repeated in a sort of shamed bewilderment. "He doesn't care for anything but himself."

Still her husband did not speak.

"I want my father!"

John disengaged his wife's hand and patted the boy's hot fingers.

"Yes, sonny! He's coming." He cocked his head as the purr of an automobile sounded on the driveway. "Bet that's him now!"

Janet's eyes were hot with unshed tears. "John, John, before he comes—I've been so blind, so selfish! I never saw the romance in the things you did, but I don't want just moonlight in the garden. Gossamer! I want something real and brave and true. I want *you*—"

"Where is he? Where?" Alanson's agonized tones came down the hall.

Miss Tait opened the door for him, and he whirled in.

"Father!"

John Thorpe got to his feet.

"Didn't I tell you, sonny, daddy would come?" He bent above Alanson, who had flung himself down beside the bed. "If you need me, I'll be right outside."

He slipped his arm about his wife, and together they moved quietly toward the door.

With a strange, sick misery in his eyes, Revell Alanson watched them go—the man he had meant to wrong, and the woman he had loved and lost.

It Came Out of Egypt

A SERIES OF SIX MYSTERIES FROM THE LAND OF THE NILE

By Sax Rohmer

Author of "Dr. Fu-Manchu," "The Golden Scorpion," etc.

FIFTH MYSTERY—THE SILKEN CORD

NOT the least of the trials that Robert Cairn experienced, during the time when he and his father were warring with their supernaturally equipped opponent, was that of preserving silence upon this matter which loomed so large in his mind, and which already had changed the course of his life.

Sometimes he met men who knew Ferrara, but who knew him only as a man about town of somewhat sinister reputation. Even to these he dared not confide what he knew of the true Ferrara. Undoubtedly they would have deemed him mad, had he spoken of the pursuits and the deeds of this uncanny, this fiendish being. How would they have listened to him had he sought to tell them of the den of spiders in Port Said, of the bats of Meydum, of the secret incense and how it was made, of the numberless murders and atrocities, wrought by means not human, which stood to the account of this adopted son of the late Sir Michael Ferrara?

So, excepting his father, Robert had no confidant. Above all, it was necessary to keep the truth from Myra Duquesne—from Myra around whom his world circled, but who yet thought of the dreadful being who wielded the sorcery of forgotten ages, as a brother.

While Myra lay ill—not yet recovered from the ghastly attack made upon her life by the evildoer whom she trusted—while, having plentiful evidence of his presence in London, Dr. Cairn and Robert vainly sought for Antony Ferrara; while any night might bring some unholy visitant to the young man's rooms, obedient to the will of this modern wizard; while these fears, anxieties, doubts, and surmises danced, impish, through his brain, it was practically impossible to pursue with success his vocation of journalism.

Yet for many reasons it was necessary that he should do so. He was endeavoring to complete a series of articles which were the outcome of his recent visit to Egypt—his editor having given him that work as being less exacting than that which properly falls to the lot of the Fleet Street "copy hunter."

Robert left his rooms about three o'clock in the afternoon, in order to seek, in the

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British Museum library, a reference which he lacked. The day was an exceedingly warm one, and he derived some little satisfaction from the fact that, at his present work, he was not called upon to don the sartorial armor of respectability. Pipe in mouth, he made his way across the Strand toward Bloomsbury.

As he walked up the steps of the museum, crossed the hallway, and passed in beneath the dome of the reading room, he wondered if, amid the mountains of erudition surrounding him, there was any wisdom so strange, so awful, as that of Antony Ferrara.

He soon found the information for which he was looking, and, having copied it into his notebook, he left the reading room. Then, as he was recrossing the hall, near the foot of the principal staircase, he paused. He found himself possessed by a sudden desire to go upstairs and visit the Egyptian Rooms. He had several times inspected the exhibits in those apartments, but never since his return from the land to whose ancient civilization they bore such striking witness.

Cairn was not pressed for time in these days, therefore he turned and passed slowly up the stairs.

There were but few visitors to the grove of mummies that afternoon. When he entered the first room, he found a small group of tourists passing idly from case to case; but on entering the second, he saw that he had the apartment to himself.

He remembered that his father had once mentioned that there was a ring in this room which had belonged to the Witch Queen. Robert Cairn wondered in which of the cases it was exhibited, and how he could recognize it.

Bending over a case containing scarabs and other amulets, many set in rings, he began to read the inscriptions on the little tickets placed beneath some of them; but none answered to the description, neither the ticketed nor the unticketed. He examined a second case with like results; but on passing to a third, in an angle near the door, his gaze immediately lighted upon a gold ring set with a strange green stone, engraved in a peculiar way. It bore no ticket, and yet, as Robert Cairn eagerly bent over it, he knew beyond the possibility of doubt that this was the ring of the Witch Queen.

Where had he seen it, or its duplicate? With his eyes fixed upon the gleaming stone, he sought to remember. That he had seen this ring before, or one exactly like it, he knew; but, strangely enough, he was unable to determine where and upon what occasion. So, his hands resting upon the case, he leaned, peering down at the singular gem.

As he stood thus, frowning in the effort of recollection, a dull white hand, having long, tapered fingers, glided across the glass until it rested directly beneath his eyes. Upon one of the slender fingers was an exact replica of the ring in the case!

Robert Cairn leaped back with a stifled exclamation, for Antony Ferrara stood before him.

"The museum ring is a copy, dear Cairn," came the huskily musical, hateful voice. "The one upon my finger is the real one."

II

Cairn realized, in his own person, the literal meaning of the overworked phrase, "frozen with amazement." Before him stood the most dangerous man in Europe—a man who had done murder and worse; a man only in name, a demon in nature. His long black eyes half closed, his perfectly chiseled ivory face expressionless, and his blood-red lips parted in a mirthless smile, Antony Ferrara watched Robert Cairn—Robert Cairn, whom he had sought to murder by means of hellish art.

Despite the heat of the day, he wore a heavy overcoat, lined with white fox fur. In his right hand—for his left still rested upon the case—he held a soft hat. With an easy nonchalance, he stood regarding the man who had sworn to kill him.

The latter made no move, uttered no word. Stark amazement held him inert.

"I knew that you were in the museum, Cairn," Ferrara continued, still having his basilisk eyes fixed upon the other from beneath the drooping lids. "I called to you to join me here."

Still Cairn did not move, did not speak.

"You have acted very harshly toward me in the past, dear Cairn; but because my philosophy consists in an admirable blending of that practiced in Sybaris with that advocated by the excellent Zeno; because, while I am prepared to make my home in a tub, like Diogenes, I nevertheless can enjoy the fragrance of a rose, the flavor of a peach—"

The husky voice seemed to be hypnotizing Cairn. It was a siren's voice, enthralling him.

"Because," continued Ferrara evenly, "in common with all humanity, I am compound of man and woman, I can resent the enmity which drives me from shore to shore; but, being myself a connoisseur of the red lips and laughing eyes of maidenhood—I am thinking more particularly of Myra—I can forgive you, dear Cairn—"

Then Cairn recovered himself.

"You white-faced cur!" he snarled through clenched teeth, and his knuckles whitened as he stepped around the case. "You dare to stand there mocking me—"

Ferrara again placed the case between himself and his enemy.

"Pause, my dear Cairn," he said, without emotion. "What would you do? Be discreet, dear Cairn. Reflect that I have only to call an attendant in order to have you pitched ignominiously into the street."

"Before God, I will throttle the life from you!" said Cairn, in a voice savagely hoarse.

He sprang again toward Ferrara. Again the latter dodged around the case with an agility which defied the heavier man.

"Your temperament is so painfully Celtic, Cairn!" he protested mockingly. "I perceive quite clearly that you will not discuss this matter judicially. Must I then call for the attendant?"

Cairn clenched his fists convulsively. Through all the tumult of his rage there had penetrated the fact that he was helpless. He could not attack Ferrara in that place; he could not detain him against his will. Ferrara had only to claim official protection to bring about the complete discomfiture of his assailant.

Across the case containing the duplicate ring Cairn glared at this incarnate fiend, whom the law, which he had secretly outraged, now served to protect. Ferrara spoke again in his huskily musical voice.

"I regret that you will not be reasonable, Cairn. There is so much that I should like to say to you. There are so many things of interest which I could tell you. Do you know that in some respects I am peculiarly gifted, Cairn? At times I can recollect, quite distinctly, particulars of former incarnations. Do you see that priestess lying there, just through the doorway? I can quite distinctly remember having met her when she was a girl. She was beautiful, Cairn. I can recall how, one night beside the Nile—but I see that you are growing impatient. If you will not avail yourself of this opportunity, I must bid you good day."

He turned and walked toward the door. Cairn leaped after him; but Ferrara, suddenly beginning to run, reached the end of the Egyptian Room and darted out on the landing, before his pursuer had time to realize what he was about.

At the moment when Ferrara turned the corner ahead of him, Cairn saw something drop. Coming to the end of the room, he stooped and picked up the object, which was a plaited silk cord about three feet in length. He did not pause to examine it more closely, but thrust it into his pocket and raced down the steps after the retreating figure of Ferrara.

At the foot, a constable held out his arm, detaining him. Cairn stopped in surprise.

"I must ask you for your name and address," said the constable gruffly.

"For Heaven's sake, what for?"

"A gentleman has complained—"

"My good man!" exclaimed Cairn, and proffered his card. "It is—it is a practical joke on his part. I know him well."

The constable looked at the card, and, from the card, suspiciously, back to Cairn. Apparently the appearance of the latter reassured him—or he may have formed a better opinion of Cairn from the fact that half a crown had quickly changed hands.

"All right, sir," he said. "It is no affair of mine. He did not charge you with anything. He only asked me to prevent you from following him."

"Quite so!" snapped Cairn irritably, and dashed off along the gallery, in the hope of overtaking Ferrara.

But, as he had feared, Ferrara had made good use of his ruse to escape. He was nowhere to be seen; and Cairn was left to wonder with what object he had risked the encounter in the Egyptian Room—for that it had been deliberate, and not accidental, he clearly perceived.

He walked down the steps of the museum, deep in reflection. The thought that he and his father had been seeking the fiend Ferrara for months, that they were sworn to kill him as they would kill a mad dog, and that he, Robert Cairn, had stood face to face with their enemy, had spoken with him, and had let him go free, unscathed, was simply maddening. Yet, in the circumstances, how could he have acted otherwise?

With no recollection of having traversed the intervening streets, he found himself walking under the archway leading to the court in which his chambers were situated. In the far corner, shadowed by a tall plane tree, where the worn iron railings of the steps and the small panes of glass in the solicitor's window on the ground floor called up memories of Charles Dickens, he paused, filled with a sort of wonderment. It seemed strange to him that such an air of peace could prevail anywhere, while Antony Ferrara lived and remained at large.

Cairn ran up the stairs to the second landing, opened the door, and entered his chambers. He was pursued by a memory—the memory of certain gruesome happenings whereof these rooms had been the scene. Knowing the powers of Antony Ferrara, he often doubted the wisdom of living there alone; but he was persuaded that to allow these fears to make headway would be to yield a point to the enemy. Yet there were nights when he found himself sleepless, listening for sounds which had seemed to arouse him, imagining sinister whispers in his room—and imagining that he could detect the dreadful odor of the secret incense.

Seating himself by the open window, Cairn took from his pocket the cord which Ferrara had dropped in the museum, and examined it curiously.

His examination of the thing did not serve to enlighten him respecting its character. It was merely a piece of silken cord, very closely and curiously plaited. He threw it down on the table, determined to show it to Dr. Cairn at the earliest opportunity. He was conscious of a sort of repugnance; and, prompted by this, he carefully washed his hands, as if the cord had been some unclean thing. Then he sat down to work, only to realize immediately that work was impossible until he had informed his father of his encounter with Ferrara.

Lifting the telephone receiver, he called up Dr. Cairn, but the doctor was not at home. He replaced the receiver, and sat staring vaguely at his open notebook.

III

For close upon an hour Robert Cairn sat at his writing table, endeavoring to puzzle out a solution of the mystery of Ferrara's motive. His reflections served only to confuse his mind. A tangible clew lay upon the table before him—the silken cord; but it was a clew of such a nature that, whatever deductions an expert detective might have based upon it, Cairn could base none.

Dusk was not far off, and he knew that his nerves were not what they had been before the events which had led to his Egyptian journey. He was back in his own chamber—the scene of one gruesome outrage in Ferrara's unholy campaign. Darkness is the ally of crime, and it had always been in the darkness that Ferrara's activities had most fearfully manifested themselves.

What was that?

Cairn ran to the window, and, leaning out, looked down into the court below. He could have sworn that a voice—a voice possessing a strange music, a husky music, wholly hateful—had called him by name.

The court was deserted, for it was already past the hour at which members of the legal fraternity desert their business premises to hasten homeward. Shadows were creeping under the quaint old archways; shadows were draping the ancient walls. There was something in the aspect of the place which reminded him of a college quadrangle at Oxford, across which, upon a certain fateful evening, he and another had watched the red light rising and falling in Antony Ferrara's rooms.

Clearly his imagination was playing him tricks; and against this he knew full well that he must guard himself. The light in his rooms was growing dim, but instinctively his gaze sought out and found the mysterious silken cord amid the litter on the table. He contemplated the telephone; but as he had left a message for his father, he knew that Dr. Cairn would ring him up as soon as he returned.

Work, Robert thought, would be the likeliest antidote to the poisonous thoughts which oppressed his mind, and again he seated himself at the table and opened his notes before him. The silken rope lay close to his left hand, but he did not touch it. He was about to switch on the reading lamp, for it was now too dark to write without it, when his mind wandered off along another channel of reflection.

He found himself picturing Myra as she had looked the last time that he had seen her. She was seated in Mr. Saunderson's garden, still pale from her dreadful illness, but beautiful—more beautiful in the eyes of Robert Cairn than any other woman in the world. The breeze was blowing her rebellious curls across her eyes—eyes bright with a happiness which he loved to see.

Her cheeks were paler than they were wont to be, and the sweet lips had lost something of their firmness. She wore a short cloak and a wide-brimmed hat, unfashionable but becoming. No one but Myra could have worn that hat successfully, he thought.

Wrapt in such loverlike memories, he forgot that he had sat down to write—forgot that he held a pen in his hand, and that this same hand had been outstretched to ignite the lamp.

When he ultimately awoke again to the hard facts of his lonely environment, he also awoke to a singular circumstance, and made the acquaintance of a strange phenomenon. He found that he had been writing unconsciously!

This was what he had written:

> Robert Cairn, renounce your pursuit of me, and renounce Myra; or to-night—

The sentence was unfinished.

Momentarily he stared at the words, endeavoring to persuade himself that he had written them consciously, in idle mood; but some voice within gave him the lie. With a suppressed groan he muttered aloud:

" It has begun!"

Almost as he spoke, there came from the passage outside a sound that led him to slide his hand across the table, and to seize his revolver.

The visible presence of the little weapon reassured him. As a further sedative, he resorted to tobacco. He filled and lighted his pipe and leaned back in the chair, blowing smoke rings toward the closed door.

He listened intently — and heard the sound again. It was a soft hiss!

And now he thought he could detect another noise, as of some creature dragging its body along the floor.

" A lizard!" he thought, and a memory of the basilisk eyes of Antony Ferrara came to him.

Both the sounds seemed to come slowly nearer and nearer—the dragging thing being evidently responsible for the hissing—until Cairn decided that the creature must be immediately outside the door.

Revolver in hand, he leaped across the room, and threw the door open. The red carpet, to right and left, was innocent of reptiles.

Perhaps the creaking of the revolving chair, as he had prepared to quit it, had frightened the thing. With that idea before him, he systematically searched all the rooms into which it might have gone.

His search was unavailing; the mysterious reptile was not to be found.

Returning again to the study, he seated himself behind the table, facing the door, which he left ajar.

Ten minutes passed in silence, only broken by the dim murmur of the distant traffic. Cairn had almost persuaded himself that his imagination — quickened by the atmosphere of mystery and horror wherein he had recently moved—was responsible for the hiss, when a new sound came to confute his reasoning.

The people occupying the chambers below were moving about, so that their footsteps were faintly audible. Above these faint footsteps, a rustling—vague, indefinite—demonstrated itself. As in the case of the hiss, it proceeded from the passage.

A light burned inside the outer door, and this, as Cairn knew, must cast a shadow before any person or thing approaching the room.

Sssf! Sssf! It was a sound like the rustle of light draperies.

The nervous suspense was almost unbearable. Cairn waited. What was creeping, slowly, cautiously, toward the open door?

Cairn toyed nervously with the trigger of his revolver.

" The arts of the West shall try conclusions with those of the East!" he said.

A shadow! Inch upon inch it grew—creeping across the door, until it covered all the threshold visible.

Some one was about to appear.

He raised the revolver.

The shadow moved along. Cairn saw the tail of it creep past the door, until no shadow was there. The shadow had come, and gone, but there was no substance.

" I am going mad!"

The words forced themselves to his lips. He rested his chin upon his hands and clenched his teeth grimly. Did the horrors of insanity stare him in the face?

Despite his stay in Egypt, he had never fully recovered from his recent illness in

London, when his nervous system had utterly collapsed.

"A month will see you fit again," his father had said.

Perhaps he had been wrong—perchance the affection had been deeper than Dr. Cairn had suspected; and now this endless carnival of supernatural happenings had strained the weakened cells, so that Robert had become as a man in a delirium.

Where did reality end and phantasy begin? Was it all merely subjective? He had read of such aberrations; and now he sat wondering if he were the victim of a like affliction.

While he wondered, he stared at the rope of silk. That was real!

Logic came to his rescue. If he had seen and heard strange things, so, too, had Sime in Egypt—so had his father, both in Egypt and in London. Inexplicable things were happening around him; and all could not be mad!

"I'm getting morbid again," he told himself. "The tricks of that damnable Ferrara are getting on my nerves—which is just what he desires and intends!"

This latter reflection spurred Cairn to new activity. Pocketing the revolver, he switched off the light in the study, and looked out of the window. Glancing across the court, he thought he saw a man standing below, peering upward.

With his hands resting upon the window ledge, Cairn looked long and steadily. There certainly was some one standing in the shadow of the tall plane tree; but whether a man or a woman, he could not determine.

The unknown remaining in the same position, apparently watching, Cairn ran downstairs, and, passing out into the court, walked rapidly across to the tree. There he paused in some surprise. There was no one visible by the tree, and the whole court was quite deserted.

"Must have slipped off through the archway," he concluded.

Walking back, he remounted the stair and entered his chambers again.

Feeling a renewed curiosity regarding the silken rope which had so strangely come into his possession, he sat down at the table, and, mastering his distaste for the thing, took it in his hands and examined it closely by the light of the lamp.

He was seated with his back to the windows, facing the door, so that no one could possibly have entered the room unseen by him. It was as he bent down to scrutinize the curious plaiting that he felt a strange sensation stealing over him, as if some one was standing very close to his chair.

Grimly determined to resist any hypnotic tricks that might be practiced against him, and well assured that there could be no other person actually present in his chambers, he sat back, resting his revolver on his knee. Prompted by he knew not what, he slipped the silk cord into the table drawer and turned the key upon it.

As he did so, a hand crept over his shoulder. The hand was followed by a bare arm of the hue of old ivory—a woman's arm!

Transfixed he sat, his eyes fastened upon a ring of dull metal, bearing a green stone inscribed with a complex figure vaguely resembling a spider, which adorned the index finger.

A faint perfume stole to his nostrils—that of the secret incense. The ring was the ring of the Witch Queen!

In this incredible moment he relaxed that iron control of his mind which alone had saved him before. Even as he realized it, and strove to recover himself, he knew that it was too late. He knew that he was lost!

IV

Gloom and blackness, unrelieved by any speck of light; murmuring, subdued, all around—the murmuring of a concourse of people. The darkness was odorous with a heavy perfume.

A voice came—followed by complete silence.

Again the voice sounded, chanting sweetly; and a response followed in deep male voices.

The response was taken up all around, while a tiny speck grew in the gloom, and grew, until it took form. Out of the darkness, the shape of a white-robed woman appeared—high up—far away.

Wherever the ray that illumined her figure originated, it did not perceptibly dispel the Stygian gloom all about her. She was bathed in dazzling light, but framed in impenetrable darkness.

Her dull gold hair was encircled by a band of white, silvery metal, bearing in front a round, burnished disk, which shone like a minor sun. Above the disk projected an ornament having the shape of a spider.

The intense light picked out every detail vividly. Neck and shoulders were bare—the gleaming ivory arms were uplifted—the long, slender fingers held aloft a golden casket covered with dim figures, almost indiscernible at that distance.

A glittering zone of the same white metal confined the woman's snowy draperies. Her bare feet peeped out from beneath her flowing robe.

Above, below, and around her was—Memphian darkness!

The silence was awesome, the perfume was stifling.

Then a voice, seeming to come from a great distance, cried:

"On your knees to the Book of Thoth! On your knees to the Queen of Wisdom, who is deathless, being unborn, who is dead though living, whose beauty is for all men—that all men may die!"

The whole invisible concourse took up the chant, and the light faded, until only the speck of the disk below the spider was visible.

Then that, too, vanished.

A bell was ringing furiously. Its din grew louder and louder until it became insupportable. Cairn threw out his arms and staggered up like a man intoxicated. He grasped at the table lamp only just in time to prevent it overturning.

The ringing was that of his telephone bell. He had been unconscious, then—under some spell!

He unhooked the receiver, and heard his father's voice.

"That you, Rob?" asked the doctor anxiously.

"Yes, sir," replied Cairn eagerly.

He opened the drawer and slipped his hand in for the silken cord.

"There is something you have to tell me?" the doctor went on.

Cairn, without preamble, plunged excitedly into an account of his meeting with Ferrara.

"The silk cord," he concluded, "I have in my hand at the present moment, and—"

"Hold on a moment!" came Dr. Cairn's voice, rather grimly.

"Hello, Rob!" the doctor went on, after a short interval. "Listen to this, from tonight's paper:

> "A curious discovery was made by an attendant in one of the rooms of the Indian Section of the British Museum late this evening. A case had been opened in some way, and, although it contained more valuable objects, the only item which the thief had abstracted was a Thug's strangling cord from Kundelee."

"But I don't understand—"

"Ferrara meant you to find that cord, boy! Remember, he is unacquainted with your chambers, and he requires a focus for his damnable forces. He knows well that you will have the thing somewhere near to you, and probably he knows something of its awful history. You are in danger! Keep a firm hold upon yourself. I shall be with you in less than half an hour!"

V

As Robert Cairn hung up the receiver, and found himself cut off again from the outer world, he realized, with terror beyond his control, how in this quiet backwater, so near to the main stream, he yet was far from human companionship.

He recalled a night when, amid such a silence as this which now prevailed about him, he had been made the subject of an uncanny demonstration; how his sanity, his very life, had been attacked; how he had fled from the crowding horrors which had been massed against him by his supernaturally endowed enemy.

There was something terrifying in the quietude of the court—a quietude which to others might have spelled peace, but which to Robert Cairn spelled menace. That Ferrara's device was aimed at his freedom, that it was intended to lead to the detention of the evildoer's enemies while he directed his activities in other directions, seemed a plausible explanation, though perhaps an inadequate one.

The carefully planned incident at the museum, whereby the policeman had become possessed of Cairn's card; the distinct possibility that a detective might knock upon his door at any moment—with the inevitable result of his detention pending inquiries—formed a chain which had seemed complete, save that Antony Ferrara was the schemer. For another to have compassed so much would have been a notable victory; for Ferrara, such a success would be trivial.

What, then, did it mean? His father had warned him, and the uncanny events of the evening stood as evidence of Dr. Cairn's wisdom. The mysterious and evil force which Antony Ferrara controlled was being focused upon him!

Slight sounds from time to time disturbed the silence; and to these he listened attentively. He longed for the arrival of his father—for the strong, calm counsel of the one man in England fitted to cope with the hellish thing that had uprisen in their midst. That he had already been subjected to some kind of hypnotic influence, Robert was unable to doubt; and having once been subjected to this influence, he might at any moment—it was a terrible reflection—fall a victim to it again.

Cairn directed all the energies of his mind to resistance. Ill defined reflection must at all costs be avoided, for the brain vaguely employed he knew to be more susceptible to attack than that directed in a well ordered channel.

Clocks were chiming the hour—he did not know what hour, nor did he seek to learn. He felt that he was at rapier play with a skilled antagonist, and that to glance aside, however momentarily, was to lay himself open to a fatal thrust.

He had not moved from the table, so that only the reading lamp upon it was lighted, and much of the room lay in half shadow. The silken cord, coiled snakelike, was close to his left hand; the revolver was close to his right. The muffled roar of traffic—diminished, since the hour grew late—reached his ears as he sat; but nothing disturbed the stillness of the court, and nothing disturbed the stillness of the room.

The notes which he had made in the afternoon at the museum were still spread open before him. He suddenly closed the book, fearful of anything calculated to distract him from the mood of tense resistance. His life, and more than his life, depended upon his successfully opposing the insidious forces which, beyond doubt, invisibly surrounded that lighted table.

There is a courage which is not physical, nor is it entirely moral—a courage often lacking in the most intrepid soldier. This was the kind of courage which Robert Cairn now called up to his aid. The occult inquirer can face, unmoved, horrors which would turn the brain of a man who wears the V. C.; on the other hand, it is questionable if the possessor of this peculiar type of bravery could face a bayonet charge. Pluck of the physical sort Cairn had in plenty; pluck of that more subtle kind he was acquiring from his growing intimacy with the terrors of the spiritual borderland.

"Who's there?"

He spoke the words aloud, and the eerie sound of his own voice added a new dread to the enveloping shadows.

His revolver grasped in his hand, he stood up, slowly and cautiously, in order that his own movements might not prevent him from hearing any repetition of the sound which had occasioned his alarm. And what had occasioned this alarm?

Either he had again become a victim of the strange trickery which already had borne him, though not physically, from Fleet Street to the secret temple of Meydum, or with his material senses he had detected a soft rapping upon the door of his room.

He knew that his outer door was closed; he knew that there was no one else in his chambers; yet he had heard a sound as of knuckles beating upon the panels of the door—the closed door of the room in which he sat!

Standing upright, he turned deliberately and faced in that direction.

The light pouring out from beneath the shade of the table lamp scarcely touched upon the door at all. Only the edges of the lower panels were clearly perceptible. The upper part of the door was masked in greenish shadow.

Intent, tensely strung, he stood. Then he advanced in the direction of the switch, in order to light the lamp fixed above the mantelpiece, and to illuminate the whole of the room. One step forward he took, then—the soft rapping was repeated.

"Who's there?"

This time he cried the words loudly, and he acquired some new assurance from the imperative note in his own voice. He ran to the switch and pressed it down. The lamp did not light.

"The filament has burned out, I suppose," he muttered.

Terror grew upon him—a terror akin to that which children experience in the darkness; but he still had a fair mastery of his emotions.

Then—not suddenly, as is the way of a failing electric lamp—but slowly, uncannily, unnaturally, the glow of the table lamp became extinguished!

Darkness! Cairn turned toward the window. This was a moonless night, and little enough illumination entered the room from the court.

Three resounding raps were struck upon the door.

At that, terror had no darker meaning for Cairn. He had plumbed its ultimate deeps; and now, like a diver, he arose again to the surface.

Heedless of the darkness, and of the seemingly supernatural means by which it had been occasioned, he threw open the door and thrust his revolver out into the corridor.

For terrors he had been prepared—for some gruesome shape, such as we read of in " The Magus," but there was nothing.

Instinctively Cairn looked straight ahead of him, as one looks who expects to encounter a human enemy; but the hallway was empty. A dim light, finding access over the door from the stair, prevailed there—sufficient to reveal the presence of any one or anything, had any one or anything been present.

Cairn stepped out from the room, and was about to walk to the outer door. The idea of flight was strong upon him, for no man can fight the invisible.

On a level with his eyes—flat against the wall, as if some one crouched there—he saw two white hands! They were slender hands, like the hands of a woman. Upon one of the tapered fingers there dully gleamed a green stone.

A peal of laughter came chokingly from Cairn's lips. He knew that his reason was tottering; for these two white hands, which now moved along the wall, as if they were sidling to the room that Cairn had just quitted, were attached to no visible body. Just two ivory hands were there—and nothing more!

That he was in deadly peril, Cairn realized fully. His complete subjection by the will force of Ferrara had been interrupted by the ringing of the telephone bell; but now the attack had been renewed.

The hands vanished.

Too well he remembered the ghastly details attendant upon the death of Sir Michael Ferrara to doubt that these slender hands were again directed upon murderous business.

A soft swishing sound reached him. Something upon the writing table had been moved. It was the strangling cord!

While speaking to his father, Cairn had taken it out from the drawer, and when he quitted the room it lay upon the blotting pad.

He stepped back toward the outer door. Something fluttered past his face, and he turned in a mad panic. The dreadful, bodiless hands groped in the darkness between himself and the exit!

Bathed in icy perspiration, he dropped the revolver into his pocket, and placed his hands upon his throat. Then he began to grope his way toward the closed door of his bedroom.

Lowering his left hand, he began to feel for the door knob. As he did so, he saw that he had made a false move. In retreating he had thrown away his last, his only chance. The phantom hands, a yard apart, and holding the silken cord stretched tightly between them, were approaching him swiftly!

He lowered his head, and charged along the passage with a wild cry.

The cord, stretched taut, struck him under the chin. Back he reeled. The cord was about his throat!

" God!" he choked, and thrust up his hands.

Madly he strove to pluck the deadly silken thing from his neck. His efforts were useless. A grip of steel was drawing it tightly, and ever more tightly, about him. Despair touched him, and almost he resigned himself.

" Rob! Rob! Open the door!"

Dr. Cairn was outside.

A new strength came to Robert, and he knew that it was the last atom left to him. To remove the rope was humanly impossible. He dropped his cramped hands, bent his body by a mighty physical effort, and hurled himself forward upon the door.

The latch was just above his head. He stretched up.

He was plucked back, but the fingers of his right hand grasped the knob convulsively. Even as that superhuman force jerked him back, he turned the knob—and fell.

All his weight hung upon the fingers that were locked about that brass disk in a grip which even the powers of darkness could not relax.

The door swung open, and Cairn swung back with it.

He collapsed, an inert heap, upon the floor. Dr. Cairn leaped in over him.

When he reopened his eyes, he lay in bed, and his father was bathing his inflamed throat.

" All right, boy! There's no damage done, thank God!"

"The hands!"

"I quite understand; but I saw no hands but your own, Rob. If it had come to an inquest, I could not even have raised my voice against a verdict of suicide!"

"But I opened the door!"

"They would have said that you repented your awful act, too late. Although it is almost impossible for a man to strangle himself under such conditions, there is no jury in England who would have believed that Antony Ferrara had done the deed."

SIXTH MYSTERY—THE BOOK OF THOTH

THE breakfast room of Dr. Cairn's house in Half Moon Street presented a cheery appearance, and this despite the gloom of the morning; for thunderous clouds hung low in the sky, and there were distant mutterings ominous of a brewing storm.

Robert Cairn stood looking out of the window. He was thinking of an afternoon at Oxford, when, to such an accompaniment as this, he had witnessed the first scene in the drama of evil wherein the man called Antony Ferrara sustained the leading rôle.

That the dénouement was at any moment to be anticipated, his reason told him. Some instinct that was not of his reason forewarned him, too, that he and his father, Dr. Cairn, were now upon the eve of that final, decisive struggle which should determine the triumph of good over evil—or of evil over good.

Already the doctor's house was invested by the uncanny forces marshaled by Antony Ferrara. The distinguished patients, who daily flocked to the consulting room of the celebrated specialist, who witnessed his perfect self-possession and took comfort from his confidence, knowing it for the confidence of strength, little suspected that a greater ill than any that flesh is heir to, assailed the doctor to whom they came for healing.

A menace, dreadful and unnatural, hung over that home, as now the thunder clouds hung over it. This well ordered household, so modern, so typical of twentieth century culture and refinement, presented none of the appearances of a beleaguered garrison; yet the house of Dr. Cairn in Half Moon Street was nothing less than an invested fortress.

A peal of distant thunder boomed from the direction of Hyde Park. Robert Cairn looked up at the lowering sky, as if seeking a portent. To his eyes it seemed that a livid face, malignant with the malignancy of a devil, looked down upon him out of the clouds.

Myra Duquesne came into the breakfast room. He turned to greet her, and, in his capacity of accepted lover, was about to kiss the tempting lips, when he hesitated—and contented himself with kissing her hand.

A sudden sense of the proprieties had assailed him. He reflected that the presence of the girl beneath the same roof as himself, although dictated by imperative need, might be open to misconstruction by the prudish. Dr. Cairn had decided that for the present Myra Duquesne must dwell beneath his own roof—just as, in feudal days, at the first hint of an approaching enemy, the baron was accustomed to call within the walls of his castle those whom it was his duty to protect. Unknown to the world, a tremendous battle raged in London, the outer works were in the possession of the enemy—and he was now before the very gates of the citadel.

Myra, though still pale from her recent illness, was already recovering some of the freshness of her beauty. In her simple morning dress, as she busied herself about the breakfast table, she was a sweet picture enough, and good to look upon. As Robert stood beside her, looking into her eyes, she smiled at him with a happy contentment that filled him with a new longing.

"Did you dream again last night?" he asked, in a voice which he strove to make matter-of-fact.

Myra nodded, and her face momentarily clouded over.

"The same dream?"

"Yes," she said in a troubled way. "At least, in some respects—"

Dr. Cairn came in, glancing at his watch.

"Good morning!" he cried cheerily. "I have actually overslept myself."

They took their seats at the table.

"Myra has been dreaming again, sir," said Robert Cairn slowly.

The doctor, serviette in hand, glanced up with an inquiry in his gray eyes.

"We must not overlook any possible weapon," he replied. "Give us particulars of your dream, Myra."

Marston entered silently with the morning fare, and, having placed the dishes upon the table, as silently withdrew. Then Myra began:

"I seemed to stand again in the barn-like building which I have described to you before. Through the rafters of the roof I could see the cracks in the tiling, and the moonlight shone through, forming irregular patches of light and shadow upon the floor. A sort of door, like that of a stable, with a heavy bar across, was dimly perceptible at the farther end of the place. The only furniture was a large deal table and a wooden chair of a very common kind. Upon the table stood a lamp—"

"What kind of lamp?" jerked Dr. Cairn.

"A silver lamp." She hesitated, looking from Robert to his father. "It was one that I have seen in—Antony's rooms. Its shaded light shone upon a closed iron box. I immediately recognized the box. You know that I described to you a dream which terrified me on the previous night?"

Dr. Cairn nodded, frowning darkly.

"Repeat your account of the former dream," he said. "I regard it as highly important."

"In my former dream," the girl resumed —and her voice had an odd, far-away quality—"the scene was the same, except that the light of the lamp was shining down upon the leaves of an open book—a very, very old book, written in strange characters. These characters appeared to dance before my eyes, almost as if they lived."

She shuddered slightly.

"The same iron box, but open, stood upon the table, with a number of smaller boxes around it. Each of these boxes was of a different material. Some were wooden; one, I think, was of ivory; one was of silver, and one of some dull metal, which might have been gold. In the chair, by the table, Antony was sitting. His eyes were fixed upon me with such a strange expression that I awoke, trembling."

Dr. Cairn nodded again.

"And last night?" he prompted.

"Last night," continued Myra, with a note of trouble in her sweet voice, "at four points around this table stood four smaller lamps, and upon the floor were rows of characters apparently traced in luminous paint. They flickered up, then grew dim, then flickered up again, in a sort of phosphorescent way. They extended from lamp to lamp, so as to surround the table and the chair. In the chair Antony Ferrara was sitting. He held a wand in his right hand—a wand with several copper rings about it. His left hand rested upon the iron box. In my dream, although I could see this all very clearly, I seemed to see it from a distance; yet, at the same time, I stood apparently close by the table. I cannot explain. I could hear nothing; only by the movements of his lips could I tell that he was speaking, or chanting."

She looked across at Dr. Cairn as if fearful to proceed, but presently continued:

"Suddenly I saw a frightful shape appear on the far side of the circle—that is to say, the table was between me and this shape. It was just like a gray cloud having the vague outlines of a man, but with two eyes of red fire glaring out from it horribly—oh, horribly! It extended its shadowy arms as if saluting Antony. He turned and seemed to question it. Then, with a look of ferocious anger—oh, it was frightful!—he dismissed the shape, and began to walk up and down beside the table, but never beyond the lighted circle, shaking his fists in the air, and, to judge by the movements of his lips, uttering most awful imprecations. He looked gaunt and ill. I dreamed no more, but awoke, conscious of a sensation as if some dead weight, which had been pressing upon me, had suddenly been removed."

Dr. Cairn glanced across at his son significantly, but the subject was not renewed throughout breakfast.

II

"Come into the library, Rob," said Dr. Cairn, when the meal was finished. "I have half an hour to spare, and there are some matters to be discussed."

He led the way into the library, with its orderly rows of learned works, its store of forgotten wisdom, and pointed to the red leather armchair. As Robert Cairn seated himself and looked across at his father, who sat at the big writing table, the scene reminded him of many dangers met and overcome in the past; for the library of the Half Moon Street house was associated in his mind with some of the blackest pages in the history of Antony Ferrara.

"Do you understand the situation, Rob?" the doctor inquired abruptly.

"I think so, sir. This I take it is his last card—this outrageous, ungodly thing which he has loosed upon us!"

Dr. Cairn nodded grimly.

"The exact frontier," he said, "dividing what we may term hypnotism from what we know as sorcery, has yet to be determined; and to which territory the doctrine of elemental spirits belongs, it would be purposeless at the moment to discuss. We may note, however, remembering with whom we are dealing, that the one hundred and eighth chapter of the ancient Egyptian 'Book of the Dead' is entitled 'The Chapter of Knowing the Spirits of the West.' Forgetting, for the time, that we dwell in the twentieth century, and looking at the situation from the point of view, say, of Eliphas Levi, Cornelius Agrippa, or the Abbé de Villars, the man whom we know as Antony Ferrara is directing against this house, and against those within it, a type of elemental spirit known as a salamander."

Robert Cairn smiled slightly.

"Ah!" said the doctor, with an answering smile, in which there was little mirth. "We are accustomed to laugh at this medieval terminology; but by what other can we speak of the activities of Ferrara?"

"Sometimes I think that we are the victims of a common madness," said his son, raising his hand to his head in a manner almost pathetic.

"We are the victims of a common enemy," replied his father sternly. "He employs weapons which often enough, in this enlightened age of ours, have condemned poor souls, as sane as you or I, to the madhouse. Why, in God's name," he cried with a sudden excitement, "does science persistently ignore all those laws which cannot be examined in the laboratory? Will the day never come when some true man of learning will endeavor to explain the movements of a table upon which a ring of hands has been placed? Will no exact scientist condescend to examine the properties of a planchette? Will no one do for the phenomena termed 'thought forms' what Newton did for that of the falling apple? Ah, Rob, in some respects, this is a darker age than those which bear the stigma of darkness!"

Silence fell for a few moments between them.

"One thing is certain," said Robert Cairn, at length. "We are in danger!"

"In the greatest danger."

"Antony Ferrara, realizing that we are bent upon his destruction, is making a final, stupendous effort to compass ours. I know that you have placed certain seals upon the windows of this house, and that after dusk those windows are never opened. I know that imprints, strangely like the imprints of fiery hands, may be seen at this moment upon the casements of Myra's room, your room, my room, and elsewhere. I know that Myra's nocturnal visions are not ordinary, meaningless dreams. I have had other evidence. I don't want to analyze these things. I confess that my mind is not capable of the task. I do not even want to know the meaning of it all. At the present moment, I only want to know one thing—who is Antony Ferrara?"

Dr. Cairn stood up, and, turning, faced his son.

"The time has come," he said, "when that question, which you have asked me so many times before, shall be answered. I will tell you all I know, and leave you to form your own opinion. Ere we go any further, I assure you that I do not know for certain who he is."

"You have said so before, sir. Will you explain what you mean?"

"When his adoptive father, Sir Michael Ferrara," resumed the doctor, beginning to pace up and down the library—"when Sir Michael and I were in Egypt, in the winter of 1893, we conducted certain investigations in the Fayum. We camped for more than three months beside the Pyramid of Meydum. The object of our inquiries was to discover the tomb of a certain queen. I will not trouble you with the details, which could be of no interest to any one but an Egyptologist. I will merely say that apart from the name and titles by which she is known to the ordinary student, this queen is also known to certain inquirers as the Witch Queen. She was not an Egyptian, but an Asiatic. In short, she was the last high priestess of a cult which became extinct at her death. Her secret mark—I am not referring to a cartouche, or anything of that kind—was a spider. It was the mark of the religion or cult which she practiced. The high priest of the principal Temple of Ra, during the reign of the Pharaoh who was this queen's husband, was one Hortotef. This was his official position, but secretly he was also the high priest of the sinister creed to which I have referred. The temple of this religion—a religion allied to black magic—was the Pyramid of Meydum. So much we knew—or Ferrara knew, and imparted to me—but for any corroborative evidence of this cult's existence we searched in vain. We explored the interior of the pyramid foot by foot, inch by inch—and found nothing. We knew that there was some other apartment in the pyramid; but in spite of our soundings, measurements, and laborious excavations, we did not come upon the entrance to it. The tomb of the queen we also failed to discover, and we therefore concluded that her mummy was buried in the secret chamber of the pyramid. We had abandoned our quest in despair when, excavating in one of the neighboring mounds, we made a discovery."

He opened a box of cigars, selected one, and pushed the box toward his son. Robert shook his head, almost impatiently, but Dr. Cairn lighted the cigar ere resuming.

"Directed, as I now believe, by a malignant will, we blundered upon the tomb of the high priest—"

"You found his mummy?"

"We found his mummy—yes; but owing to the carelessness—and the fears—of the native laborers, it was exposed to the sun until it crumbled away and was lost. I would a similar fate had attended the other one that we found!"

"What—another mummy?"

"We discovered"—Dr. Cairn spoke very deliberately—"a certain papyrus. The translation of this is contained"—he rested the point of his finger upon the writing table—"in the unpublished book of Sir Michael Ferrara, which lies here. That book, Rob, will never be published now. Furthermore, we discovered the mummy of a child—"

"A child?"

"A boy. Not daring to trust the natives, we removed it secretly, at night, to our own tent. Before we commenced the task of unwrapping it, Sir Michael, the most brilliant scholar of his age, had proceeded so far in deciphering the papyrus that he determined to complete his reading before we proceeded further. It contained directions for performing a certain process upon the mummy of the child."

"Do I understand—"

"Already you are discrediting the story! Ah, I can see it; but let me finish. Unaided, we performed this process upon the embalmed body of the child. Then, in accordance with the directions of that dead magician—that accursed, malignant being, who thus had sought to secure for himself a new tenure of evil life—we laid the mummy, treated in a certain fashion, in the King's Chamber of the Pyramid of Meydum. It remained there for thirty days—from moon to moon."

"You guarded the entrance?"

"You may assume what you like, Rob; but I could swear before any jury that no one entered the pyramid throughout that time. Yet, since we were only human, we may have been mistaken. I have only to add that at the rising of the new moon in the ancient Sothic month of Panoi, when we again entered the chamber, a living baby, some six months old, and perfectly healthy, solemnly blinked up at the lights that we held in our trembling hands!"

Dr. Cairn reseated himself at the table, and turned the chair so that he faced his son. He sat with the smoldering cigar between his teeth, and a slight smile upon his lips.

Now it was Robert's turn to rise and begin feverishly to pace the floor.

"You mean, sir, that this infant, which you found in the pyramid, was adopted by Sir Michael?"

"Was adopted — yes. Sir Michael engaged nurses for him, reared him here in England, educating him as an Englishman, sent him to a public school, sent him to—"

"To Oxford! Antony Ferrara! What? Do you seriously tell me that this is the history of Antony Ferrara?"

"On my word of honor, boy, that is all I know of Antony Ferrara. Is it not enough?"

"Merciful God! It is incredible!" groaned Robert Cairn.

"From the time that he attained to manhood," said Dr. Cairn evenly, "this adopted son of my poor old friend has passed from crime to crime. By means which are beyond my comprehension, and which go far to confirm his supernatural origin, he has acquired — knowledge. According to the ancient Egyptian beliefs, the *khu,* or magical power, of a fully equipped adept, at the death of the body, could enter into anything prepared for its reception. According to these ancient beliefs, then, the *khu* of the high priest Hortotef entered into the body of this infant, who was his son, and whose mother was the Witch Queen; and to-day, in this modern London, a wizard of ancient Egypt, armed with the lost lore of that magical land, walks among us! What that lore is worth, it would be profitless for us to discuss; but that he possesses it—all of it—I know beyond doubt. The most ancient and most powerful magical book which has ever existed was the 'Book of Thoth.'"

The doctor walked across to a distant shelf, selected a volume, opened it at a particular page, and placed it on his son's knees.

"Read there!" he said, pointing.

The words seemed to dance before the younger man's eyes, and this is what he read:

> To read two pages enables you to enchant the heavens, the earth, the abyss, the mountains, and the sea.
>
> You shall know what the birds of the sky and the crawling things are saying.
>
> When the second page is read, if you are in the world of ghosts, you will grow again in the shape you wore on earth.

"Heavens!" whispered Robert Cairn. "Is this the writing of a madman, or can such things possibly be?"

He read on:

> This book is in the middle of the river at Koptos, in an iron box—

"An iron box!" he muttered. "An iron box!"

"So you recognize the iron box?" jerked Dr. Cairn.

His son read on:

> In the iron box is a bronze box; in the bronze box is a sycamore box; in the sycamore box is an ivory and ebony box; in the ivory and ebony box is a silver box; in the silver box is a golden box; and in that is the book.
>
> It is twisted all round with snakes and scorpions and all the other crawling things.

"The man who holds the 'Book of Thoth,'" said Dr. Cairn, breaking the silence, "holds a power which should only belong to God. The creature who is known to the world as Antony Ferrara holds that book—do you doubt it? Therefore you know now, as I have known long enough, with what manner of enemy we are fighting. You know that this time it is a fight to the death—"

He stopped abruptly, staring out of the window.

A man with a large photographic camera, standing upon the opposite pavement, was busily engaged in focusing the house.

"What is this?" muttered Robert Cairn, also stepping to the window.

"It is a link between sorcery and science," replied the doctor. "You remember Ferrara's photographic gallery at Oxford—the zenana, you used to call it? You remember having seen in his collection photographs of persons who afterward came to violent ends?"

"I begin to understand!"

"Thus far, his endeavors to concentrate the whole of the evil forces at his command upon this house have had but poor results. They have merely caused Myra to dream strange dreams — clairvoyant dreams, instructive dreams, more useful to us than to the enemy—and have resulted in certain marks upon the outside of the house, adjoining the windows, which I have sealed in a particular manner. You understand me?"

"By means of photographs he—concentrates, in some way, malignant forces upon certain points—"

"He focuses his will — yes. The man who can really control his will, Rob, is supreme, below the Godhead. Ferrara can almost do this now. Before he has become wholly proficient—"

"I understand, sir," snapped his son grimly.

"He is barely of age, boy," Dr. Cairn said, almost in a whisper. "In another year he would menace the world. Where are you going?"

He grasped his son's arm as Robert started for the door.

"That man yonder—"

"Diplomacy, Rob! Guile against guile! Let the man do his work, which he does in all innocence; then follow him. Learn where his studio is situated, and, from that point, proceed to learn—"

"The situation of Ferrara's hiding place?" cried his son excitedly. "I understand! Of course you are right, sir!"

"I will leave the inquiry in your hands, Rob. Unfortunately other duties call me."

III

Robert Cairn entered a photographer's shop in Baker Street.

"You recently arranged to do views of some houses in the West End for a gentleman?" he said to the girl in charge.

"That is so," she replied, after a moment's hesitation. "We did pictures of the house of some celebrated specialist, to illustrate a magazine article, I believe. Do you wish us to do something similar?"

"Not at the moment," replied Robert Cairn, smiling slightly. "I merely want the address of your client."

"I do not know that I can give you that," replied the girl doubtfully; "but he will be here about eleven o'clock for proofs, if you wish to see him."

"I wonder if I can confide in you!" said Robert Cairn, looking the girl frankly in the eyes.

She seemed rather confused.

"I hope there is nothing wrong," she murmured.

"You have nothing to fear," he replied; "but unfortunately there is something wrong, which, however, I cannot explain. Will you promise me not to tell your client—I do not ask his name—that I have been here, or have been making any inquiries respecting him?"

"I think I can promise that," the girl replied.

"I am much indebted to you."

Robert Cairn hastily left the shop, and began to look about him for a likely hiding place from whence, unobserved, he might watch the photographer's. An antique furniture shop, some little distance away on the opposite side of the street, attracted his attention. He glanced at his watch. It was half past ten.

If, upon the pretense of examining some of the stock, he could linger in the furniture shop for half an hour, he would be enabled to get upon the track of Ferrara!

His mind made up, he walked along and entered the shop. For the next half hour, he passed from item to item of the collection displayed there, surveying each in the leisurely manner of a connoisseur; but always he kept watch, through the window, on the photographer's establishment across the street.

Promptly at eleven o'clock a taxicab drew up at the door, and from it a slender man alighted. Despite the heat of the morning, he wore an overcoat of some woolly material. In his gait, as he crossed the pavement to enter the photographer's shop, there was something revoltingly effeminate—a sort of catlike grace which would have been noticeable in a woman, but which was unnatural, and, for some obscure reason, sinister, in a man.

It was Antony Ferrara!

Even at that distance and in that brief time, Robert Cairn could see the ivory face, the abnormal red lips, and the long black eyes of this arch fiend, this monster masquerading as a man. He had much ado to restrain his rising passion; but, knowing that all depended upon his cool action, he waited until Ferrara had entered the photographer's door.

With a word of apology to the furniture dealer, Cairn passed quickly into Baker Street. Everything rested, now, upon his securing a cab before Ferrara came out again. Ferrara's cabman, evidently, was waiting for him.

Fortunately, a taxi driver hailed Cairn at the very moment that he gained the pavement. Concealing himself behind the vehicle, he gave the man rapid and precise instructions.

"You see that taxi outside the photographer's?" he said.

The man nodded.

"Wait until some one comes out of the shop and is driven off in it; then follow. Do not lose sight of the cab for a moment. When it draws up, and wherever it draws up, drive right past it. Don't attract attention by stopping. You understand?"

"Quite, sir," said the man, smiling slightly.

Cairn entered the cab, and the driver drew up at a point some little distance beyond, from whence he could watch.

Two minutes later Ferrara came out and was driven off. The pursuit commenced.

His cab, ahead, proceeded to Westminster Bridge, across to the south side of the river, and, by way of a commercial thoroughfare at the back of St. Thomas's Hospital, emerged at Vauxhall. Thence the pursuit led to Stockwell, Herne Hill, and still onward toward Dulwich.

It suddenly occurred to Robert Cairn that Ferrara was making in the direction of Mr. Saunderson's house at Dulwich Common—the house in which Myra had had her mysterious illness, and in which she had remained until it became evident that her safety depended upon her never being left alone for one moment.

"What can be his object?" muttered Cairn.

He wondered if Ferrara, for some inscrutable reason, was about to call upon Mr. Saunderson; but when the cab ahead, having passed the park, continued on past the lane in which the house was situated, he began to search for some other solution of the problem of Ferrara's destination.

Suddenly he saw that the cab ahead had stopped. The driver of his own taxi, without slackening speed, pursued his way.

Cairn crouched down upon the floor, fearful of being observed. No house was visible to right or left, merely open fields; and he knew that it would be impossible for him to delay in such a spot without attracting attention.

Ferrara's cab passed. It was empty.

"Keep on till I tell you to stop!" cried Cairn.

He dropped the speaking tube, and, turning, looked out through the little window at the back. Ferrara had dismissed his cab. Cairn saw him entering a gate and crossing a field on the right of the road.

Cairn turned again, and took up the tube.

"Stop at the first house we come to!" he directed. "Hurry!"

Presently a deserted-looking building was reached—a large, straggling house which obviously had no tenant. Here the man pulled up, and Cairn leaped out. As he did so, he heard Ferrara's cab driving back by the way it had come.

"Here," he said, and gave the man half a sovereign. "Wait for me."

He started back along the road at a run. Even had he suspected that he was followed, Ferrara could not have seen him; but when he came up level with the gate through which Antony had gone, Cairn slowed down and crept cautiously forward.

Ferrara, who by this time had reached the other side of the field, was in the act of entering a barnlike structure which must once have formed part of some farm buildings. Opening one of the big doors, he disappeared within.

"The place of which Myra has been dreaming!" muttered Cairn.

Certainly, viewed from that point, it seemed to answer, externally, to the girl's description. The roof was of moss-grown red tiles, and Cairn could imagine how the moonlight would readily find access through the chinks which no doubt existed in the weather-worn structure. He had little doubt that this was the place dreamed of, or seen clairvoyantly, by Myra, and that this was the place to which Ferrara had retreated in order to conduct his nefarious operations.

It was eminently suited to the purpose, being entirely surrounded by unoccupied land. For what ostensible purpose Ferrara had leased it, Cairn could not conjecture, nor did he concern himself with the matter. His enemy's real intent was sufficiently evident to the man who had suffered so much at the hands of this modern sorcerer.

To approach closer would have been indiscreet, as Cairn could see; and he was sufficiently diplomatic to resist the temptation to obtain a nearer view of the place. He knew that everything depended upon secrecy. Antony Ferrara must not suspect that his black laboratory was known.

Cairn decided to return to Half Moon Street without delay, fully satisfied with the result of his investigation. He walked rapidly back to where the cab waited, gave the man his father's address, and, in three-quarters of an hour, was back in Half Moon Street.

Dr. Cairn had not yet dismissed the last of his patients. Myra, accompanied by Miss Saunderson, was out shopping; and Robert found himself compelled to possess his soul in patience. He paced restlessly up and down the library, sometimes taking a book at random, scanning its pages with unseeing eyes, and replacing it without having formed the slightest impression of its contents.

He tried to smoke; but his pipe was constantly going out, and he had littered the hearth untidily with burned matches, when Dr. Cairn suddenly opened the library door and entered.

"Well?" he said eagerly.

Robert Cairn leaped forward.

"I have tracked him, sir!" he cried. "My God, while Myra was at Saunderson's, she was almost next door to the beast! His den is in a field no more than a thousand yards from the garden wall—from Saunderson's orchid houses!"

"He is daring," muttered Dr. Cairn; "but his selection of that site served two purposes. The spot was suitable in many ways, and we were least likely to look for him next door, as it were. It was a move characteristic of the accomplished criminal that he is."

Robert Cairn nodded.

"It is the place of which Myra dreamed, sir—I have not the slightest doubt about that. What we have to find out is at what times of the day and night he goes there."

"I doubt," interrupted Dr. Cairn, "if

he often visits the place during the day. As you know, he has abandoned his rooms in Piccadilly; but I have no doubt, knowing his sybaritic habits, that he has some other palatial place in town. I have been making inquiries in several directions, especially in—certain directions—"

The physician paused.

"Additions to the zenana?" inquired Robert.

Dr. Cairn nodded his head grimly.

"Exactly," he replied. "There is not a scrap of evidence upon which he could be legally convicted; but since his return from Egypt, Rob, he has added other victims to his list."

"The fiend!" cried the younger man. "The unnatural fiend!"

"Unnatural is the word. He is literally unnatural; but many women find him irresistible. He is typical of the unholy brood to which he belongs. The evil beauty of the Witch Queen sent many a soul to perdition. The evil beauty of her son has zealously carried on the work."

"What must we do?"

"I doubt if we can do anything to-day. The early morning is the most suitable time to visit his den at Dulwich Common."

"But the new photographs of the house! There will surely be another attempt upon us to-night!"

"Yes—there will be another attempt upon us to-night," said the doctor wearily. "This is the year 1914; yet here in Half Moon Street, when dusk falls, we shall be submitted to an attack of a kind to which mankind probably has not been submitted for many ages. We shall be called upon to dabble in the despised magical art. We shall be called upon to place certain seals upon our doors and windows; to protect ourselves against an enemy, who, like Eros, laughs at locks and bars."

"Is it possible for him to succeed?"

"Quite possible, Rob, in spite of all our precautions. I feel in my very bones that to-night he will put forth a supreme effort."

A bell rang.

"I think," continued the doctor, "that this is Myra. She must get all the sleep she can during the afternoon; for to-night I have determined that we three must not think of sleep, but must remain together, here in the library. We must not lose sight of one another—you understand?"

"I am glad that you have proposed it!" cried Robert Cairn eagerly. "I, too, feel that we have come to a critical moment in the contest."

"To-night," continued the doctor, "I shall be prepared to take certain steps. My preparations will occupy me throughout the rest of to-day."

IV

At dusk that evening, Dr. Cairn, his son, and Myra Duquesne met together in the library. The girl looked rather pale.

An odor of incense pervaded the house, coming from the doctor's study, wherein he had locked himself early in the evening, after issuing instructions that he was not to be disturbed. The exact nature of the preparations which he had been making, Robert Cairn was unable to conjecture; and some instinct warned him that his father would not welcome any inquiry upon the matter. He realized that Dr. Cairn proposed to fight Antony Ferrara with his own weapons. Much against his will, the skilled physician was entering the arena in the character of a practical magician—a character quite new to him, and obviously abhorrent.

At half past ten the servants all retired, in accordance with Dr. Cairn's orders. From where he stood by the tall mantelpiece, Robert Cairn could watch Myra Duquesne, a delightful picture in her simple evening gown, where she sat reading in a distant corner, her delicate beauty forming a strong contrast to the background of somber volumes.

Dr. Cairn sat by the big table, smoking, and apparently listening. A strange idea which he had put in force every evening for the past week, he had adopted again to-night. There were little white seals, bearing a curious figure of interlaced triangles, upon the inside of every window in the house, upon the doors, and even upon the fire grates.

At another time Robert might have thought his father mad, childish, thus to play at wizardry; but he had had experiences which had taught him to recognize that upon such seemingly trivial matters great issues might turn, that in the strange land over the border there were stranger laws—laws which he could but dimly understand. There he acknowledged the superior wisdom of Dr. Cairn, and did not question it.

At eleven o'clock a comparative quiet had come upon Half Moon Street. The sound of the traffic had gradually subsided, until it seemed to him that the house stood, not in the busy West End of London, but isolated, apart from its neighbors. It seemed to him an abode marked out and separated from the other abodes of man, a house enveloped in an impalpable cloud—a cloud of evil, summoned up and directed by the wizard hand of Antony Ferrara, son of the Witch Queen.

Although Myra pretended to read, and Dr. Cairn, from his fixed expression, might have been supposed to be preoccupied, in point of fact they were all waiting, with nerves at highest tension, for the opening of the attack. In what form it would come—whether it would be vague moanings and tappings upon the windows, such as they had already experienced, whether it would be a phantasmal storm, a clap of phenomenal thunder—they could not conjecture. They did not know whether the enemy would attack suddenly, or if his menace would grow, threatening from afar off, and then gradually penetrating into the heart of the garrison.

It came suddenly and dramatically.

Dropping her book, Myra uttered a piercing scream of horror, and, with eyes glaring madly, fell forward on the carpet, unconscious.

Robert Cairn leaped to his feet with clenched fists. His father stood up so rapidly as to overset his chair, which fell crashing upon the floor.

Together, they turned and looked in the direction in which the girl had been looking. They fixed their eyes upon the draperies of the library window—which were drawn together. The whole window was luminous, as if a bright light shone outside—the light of some unholy fire!

Involuntarily they both stepped back, and Robert Cairn clutched his father's arm convulsively.

The curtains seemed to be rendered transparent, as if some powerful ray were directed upon them. The window appeared through them as a rectangular blue patch. Only two lamps were burning in the library—one in the corner, by which Myra had been reading, and the green-shaded lamp upon the table. The end of the room by the window, then, was in shadow, against which this unnatural light shone brilliantly.

"My God!" whispered Robert Cairn. "That's Half Moon Street outside. There can be no light—"

He broke off, for now he perceived the thing which had occasioned the girl's scream of horror.

In the middle of the rectangular patch of light, a gray shape, only partially opaque, moved with shifting, luminous clouds about it. It was taking form, growing momentarily more substantial.

It had some remote resemblance to a man, but its unique characteristic was its awful grayness. It had the grayness of a rain cloud, yet rather that of a column of smoke; and from the center of the dimly defined head, two eyes—balls of living fire—glared out into the room.

Heat was beating into the library from the window—physical heat, as if a furnace door had been opened. The shape, ever growing more palpable, was moving forward toward the inmates of the room—approaching—the heat every instant growing greater.

It was impossible to look at those two eyes of fire. It was almost impossible to move. Indeed, Robert Cairn was transfixed with such horror as, in all his dealings with the monstrous Ferrara, he had never known before.

His father, shaking off the dread which possessed him also, leaped at one bound to the library table. Robert Cairn vaguely perceived that a small group of objects, looking like balls of wax, lay there. Dr. Cairn had evidently been preparing them in the locked study. Now he took them all up in his left hand, and confronted the thing—which seemed to be growing into the room, for it did not advance in the ordinary sense of the word.

One by one, the doctor threw the white pellets into that vapory grayness. As they touched the curtain, they hissed, as if they had been thrown into a fire; they melted; and upon the transparency of the drapings, as upon a sheet of gauze, showed faint streaks, where, melting, they trickled down the tapestry.

As he cast each pellet from his hand, Dr. Cairn took a step forward, and cried out certain words in a loud voice—words which Robert Cairn had never heard uttered before—words in a language which some instinct told him to be ancient Egyptian.

Their effect was to force that dreadful shape gradually to disperse, as a cloud of smoke might disperse when the fire which occasions it is extinguished slowly. Seven pellets, in all, Dr. Cairn threw toward the window. The seventh struck the curtains, now once more visible in their proper form.

The fire elemental had been vanquished!

Robert Cairn clutched his hair in a sort of frenzy. He glared at the draped window, feeling that he was making a supreme effort to retain his sanity. Had it ever looked otherwise? Had the tapestry ever faded before him, becoming visible in a great light which had shone through it from behind? Had the thing, a thing unnamable, indescribable, stood there?

He read his answer upon the tapestry. Whitening streaks showed where the doctor's pellets, melting, had trickled down the curtains!

" Lift Myra upon the settee."

It was Dr. Cairn speaking, calmly, but in a strained voice.

As if emerging from a mist, Robert Cairn turned to the recumbent white form upon the carpet. Then, with a great cry, he leaped forward and raised the girl's head.

" Myra!" he groaned. " Myra, speak to me!"

" Control yourself, boy," rapped Dr. Cairn sternly. " She cannot speak until you have revived her. She has swooned—nothing worse."

" And—"

" We have conquered!"

V

THE mists of early morning still floated over the fields when these two, set upon strange business, walked through the damp grass to the door of the barn, whence radiated the deadly waves which on the previous night had reached them, or almost reached them, in the library of the house in Half Moon Street.

The big double door was padlocked, but for this they had come provided. Ten minutes' work upon the padlock sufficed—and Dr. Cairn swung wide the door.

A suffocating smell—the smell of that incense with which they had too often come in contact—was wafted out to them. There was a dim light inside the place. Without hesitation both entered.

A deal table and chair constituted the sole furniture of the interior. Part of the floor was roughly boarded, and a brief examination of the boarding sufficed to discover the hiding place in which Antony Ferrara kept the utensils of his awful art.

Dr. Cairn lifted out two heavy boards, and in a recess below lay a number of singular objects. There were four antiqu lamps of most peculiar design. There wa a larger silver lamp, which both of ther had seen before in various apartments o cupied by Antony Ferrara. There were number of other things which Robert Cair could not have described, had he bee called upon to do so, for the reason tha he had seen nothing like them before, an had no idea of their nature or purpose.

Conspicuous among this curious hoar was a square iron box, of workmanshi dissimilar from any workmanship know to Robert Cairn. Its lid was covered wit a curious sort of scrollwork. Rober reached down, in order to lift it out.

" Do not touch it!" cried the docto " For God's sake, do not touch it!"

Robert Cairn started back, as if he ha seen a poisonous snake. Turning to hi father, he saw that the latter was pullin on a pair of white gloves. As he fixed hi eyes upon these, in astonishment, he pe ceived that they were smeared all over wit some white preparation.

" Stand aside, boy!" said the doctor– and for once his voice shook slightly. " D not look again until I call to you. Tur your head aside!"

Silent with amazement, Robert Cair obeyed. He heard his father lift out th iron box. He heard him open it, for h had already perceived that it was no locked. Then, quite distinctly, he hear him close it again, and replace it in th cache.

" Do not turn, boy!" came a hoars whisper.

Robert did not turn, but waited, his hear beating painfully, for what should happe next.

" Stand aside from the door," came th order. " When I have gone out, do no look after me. I will call to you when i is finished."

He obeyed without demur.

His father passed him, and Robert hear him walking through the damp grass out side the door of the barn. There followe an intolerable interval. From some place not very distant, he could hear Dr. Cair moving, could hear the chink of glass upo glass, as if he were pouring out somethin from a stoppered bottle. Then a fain acrid smell was wafted to his nostrils, per ceptible even above the heavy odor of th incense from the barn.

" Relock the door!" came the cry.

Robert Cairn reclosed the door, snapped the padlock fast, and began to fumble with the skeleton keys with which they had come provided. He discovered that to reclose the padlock was quite as difficult as to open it. His hands were trembling, too, and he was all anxiety to see what had taken place behind him.

At last, when a sharp click told of the task accomplished, he turned in a flash and saw his father placing tufts of grass upon a charred patch, from which a faint haze of smoke still arose. He walked over and joined him.

"What have you done, sir?"

"I have robbed him of his armor!" replied the doctor grimly. His face was very pale, his eyes were very bright. "I have destroyed the 'Book of Thoth'!"

"Then he will be unable—"

"He will still be able to summon his dreadful servant, Rob. Having summoned him once, he can summon him again, but—"

"Well, sir?"

"He cannot control him."

"Good God!"

That night brought no repetition of the uncanny attack. In the gray half light before the dawn, Dr. Cairn and his son, themselves like two phantoms, again crept across the fields to the barn in which Antony Ferrara had kept his utensils.

The padlock hung loose in the ring.

"Stay where you are, Rob!" cautioned the doctor.

He gently pushed the door open—wider—wider—and looked in. There was an overpowering odor of burning flesh. He turned to Robert, and spoke in a steady voice.

"The brood of the Witch Queen is extinct!" he said.

THE END

THE GRAVE OF LOVE

I LOOKED into a grave to-day;
A letter to you it seemed.
A letter it was indeed—the grave
Of all that I had dreamed.

All the spices were there,
And the wreath and the plaited hair,
And a long, long music was there;
But you couldn't hear or see—
They were meant for me.

How should another know?
For God's sake, leave me apart!
Only a little while—it will stop
Bleeding, my heart.

Leave me alone with my letter!
Never a grave so deep,
Never grave so filled
With the poppies of sleep!

Nay, look with me, if you will,
There at those perished leaves—
Roses, violets—the like
Every man believes.

Oh, God, look! But no,
I will listen no more nor see;
For there, deep down in the grave,
You will find not her, but me!

Oliver C. Moore

Decent Things

THE STORY OF AN INTERESTING SOCIAL EXPERIMENT

By Edgar Franklin

Author of "Regular People," "A Noise in Newboro," etc.

OLD Stephen Valmer believes that the salvation of modern civilization depends, not on the degenerate rich, but on the sturdy qualities of the lower classes. He therefore decides to use part of his wealth for the benefit of poor girls, who, with proper training, might become the mothers of a better generation. His lawyer, Penning, advises him to try out the idea, first, with one girl. Accordingly, he takes May Allers, who works at the Mors Stamping Mill, has her carefully trained in all the social graces, and introduces her into his own household. This consists of his two married daughters, Edith Dinsmore and Ina Fayles, and their husbands. A nephew, John Valmer, formerly lived with him, but John is a young man of strange ideas, and has gone out into the world to earn his own living. He is running a press in the Mors Stamping Mill, under the assumed name of Jim Hammond.

Mary Allers—her Christian name has been "improved" from May to Mary—does not find her new environment altogether congenial. Indeed, she is so much disgusted by the behavior of the fast set in which Stephen Valmer's daughters move, and by the unwelcome attentions of their husbands, that she resolves to go back to her father's humble home.

Meanwhile John Valmer, alias Jim Hammond, calling at his uncle's house, sees Mary, and is so much attracted by her that he decides to return to his old quarters there. He is greatly disappointed when, at luncheon, the girl is missing from the table, and cannot be found in the house or grounds.

XIV

TO John Valmer, at least, there appeared to be a curious absence of excitement. When one has guests, you know, one feels a certain responsibility for their welfare, a certain interest in such unusual things as may possibly befall them; and when the guest happens to be one of such rare quality as Mary Allers, it seemed to John, the gathering should, at the very least, have expressed its concern and then set about finding Mary.

She was Ina's friend, of course—or Edith's, which came to the same thing—and yet both these young women were sitting opposite him quite unperturbed. Wells Dinsmore toyed with his small mustache and blinked in the peculiarly blank, asinine fashion that was part of him. Only Uncle Stephen went so far as to frown and to mutter:

"That's very odd! What's become of the girl?"

He looked about. Mrs. Dinsmore smiled with a suggestion of acidity.

"Why ask me, father? I have no idea."

"It seems quite natural to me that you should have an idea. You girls talk things over, don't you? What was Mary planning to do to-day?"

"She didn't confide in me."

"Ina, then?"

"She said nothing to me about what she contemplated for to-day, dad," the younger daughter replied, smiling faintly. "Come to think of it, none of us have seen her since we went to the club last evening. She left the dance quite early, and came home alone."

"*Why?*"

The elder gentleman's stare grew slightly darker. John, in the queerest little way, warmed toward his uncle. He had been right in his estimate of that gentleman, ever since boyhood—Uncle Steve was far and away the best member of his own family!

Mr. Dinsmore ceased his blinking abruptly, and opened his eyes in something like a baby stare.

"Heavens! Don't look at *me!*" he said. "I've no idea why she left!"

"Who on earth said you had?" Stephen

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rapped out. "Why didn't Mary stay at the club last night, Ina?"

"I can't tell you, either. She just went and—oh, yes, she told Henry to say that she had a headache. I suppose she was in bed and asleep a long time before we got back."

"She wasn't actually ill?"

"No, she wasn't! Nobody could possibly have been in more perfect health!" Mrs. Dinsmore said impatiently. "Perhaps she walked over to the Masterses', father, and stayed for lunch. She seemed to hit it off pretty well with Dot, and they were quite clubby here yesterday. They're a barbarous crew over there, you know. They'd keep her without ever thinking to phone over."

"But this—er—Mary person," John put in. "Isn't she capable of doing her own telephoning?"

Edith shrugged, and favored him with an unpleasant, crooked little smile.

"Just possible that she may not have felt it necessary to bother."

"I don't understand."

"Oh, one isn't required to understand anything about Mary, John," the elder daughter observed, and went so far as to glance at her father.

"I don't understand that, either. Don't you—don't you like her?"

"Well, I can't say that any pangs of real infatuation for Mary have come my way as yet, Johnny," Mrs. Dinsmore said coolly. "You see—"

"Because, if you don't, why the deuce did you ask her here?" young Mr. Valmer demanded.

Mrs. Dinsmore opened her eyes.

"Dear me! You, too!" she observed. "You've never even seen her, but you're snatching up the cudgels, and—"

"Rot! It's simply that it seems absurd and unfair to invite a person to stay with you, when—"

"Oh, but I didn't!" Edith interrupted in turn.

"Ina, then."

"Ina didn't, either. Neither of us, you see—"

"Edith!" Stephen Valmer put in, with a dangerous sweetness of tone that caused the elder daughter to sit up suddenly. "May I point out that you are discussing a guest of the house?"

"Well, have I said anything—*anything* that seems to reflect upon her in any way?" Mrs. Dinsmore inquired, a little weak in her defiance.

"Your tone and your manner indicate a hostility which seems to be without any clear reason, my dear. Has Mary offended you?"

"Of course she hasn't," Ina said hastily. "Edie's always touchy after a dance—even after a little dance."

"Then will you be good enough to call up the Masterses' house and see if Mary's there? If not, look around a bit, Ina, and see what's become of her."

"Of course I will, dad," said the younger daughter, and hurried away.

John stared in plain mystification. His uncle's usually sleek coat seemed more than a little ruffled now—which was odd, because Mr. Valmer, as a rule, took small interest in the female guests of the home. Possibly he had the good taste to take a fancy to Mary on his own account—which wasn't odd at all, since it must have been difficult for any one to dislike that young woman.

At all events, he had evidently turned irritable now. He was standing over there by the window, with his somewhat impressive brows pulled down, his hands behind his back, and a scowl on his face.

"Where's Penning?" he snapped.

"Went home to lunch, didn't he, father?" Dinsmore yawned.

"What? Of course he did! Why can't he stay here for lunch when he's asked? Why isn't he back? He was coming back!"

"He'll be here shortly, poor—he'll be here, I mean to say. Ha! Here's Ina! Word of the little wanderer?"

"She hasn't been at the Masterses'," Mrs. Fayles reported. "Dot and her mother and her sister have all gone to the city for the day, and Mary hasn't called. That's all the maid could tell me. She's probably just gone for a walk and left her watch behind. She told me yesterday that she loved to walk for miles and miles."

"Ah!" grunted the master of the house. "Well, will one of you communicate to Barton that, should Mr. Penning see fit to reappear during the afternoon, I am to be found in the library?"

With his hands still behind his back, he tramped away. Distantly, a door slammed.

"Jolly chap, father!" breathed Mr. Dinsmore. "Always cheery — obvious — dependable — that sort of thing. Going into the giddy old sun parlor myself, to smoke and rest a little."

They moved off with him to that very pleasant room on the south side of the house. Mr. Dinsmore sank down with a wearied sigh, but his wife, her eyes suddenly big with a new thought, stopped short in the doorway.

"My word!" she gasped. "I never thought of that! I—wait!"

She whirled about and raced away. Mr. Dinsmore stared blankly after her.

"Gad! Can't be she's locked Mary in a closet, or something, and forgotten her, can it?" he asked.

"Does she dislike this Mary so much that she'd go to that length?" John demanded, darkly and amazedly.

"Eh? I give it up, Jack. Can't tell about Edie, you know," sighed her husband, who seemed to have no great faith in any of his family by marriage. "I fancy she doesn't just adore the girl, and—"

"There's no reason why she should—so long as father's not present to hear me say it," Ina remarked with extreme crispness.

"But—but there's certainly no reason why she shouldn't!" Mr. Dinsmore submitted. "Mary's a fine girl—a dashed fine girl, so she is!"

He winked, slyly, wickedly, significantly, at John Valmer. John's teeth came together with a savage little click. That wink had had its own odd effect.

At about this point, it had been John's intention to admit, in the most natural way, that he had met the lady in question, and, incidentally, to learn all that might be learned about her. Now his tongue refused to deal with the subject.

As a boy, he had been on the closest of terms with his girl cousins, who at that time were as simple and as wholesome as himself. In their later development, however, he had found no cause whatever for enthusiasm. He and they had drifted so far apart that discussion of any intimate subject was difficult, and this one of Mary Allers, for some queer reason, had promised to be difficult in the extreme. To talk over Mary with this bounder of a Dinsmore—

John was beginning to redden angrily when Mrs. Dinsmore reappeared, evidently quite weak with relief.

"It's all right!" she announced.

"What is, honey?" asked her husband.

"Nothing of value is missing, I mean. Do you know, that thought just struck me as we came in here? But I looked in my little wall safe, and nothing has been touched. Yours seems to be all right, too, by the way, Ina. *That* would have been a mess!"

"Do you—do you mean that you thought this Mary Allers was a jewel crook?" John cried.

"We haven't a particle of evidence that she's not, you know," Mrs. Dinsmore said calmly. "In fact, that very idea has been running through my head for two days. It would be the simple answer, and it *is* done. Her—gang, I suppose you'd call it—might have thrust her on father with some sort of freak appeal, just to establish her in the house."

"Is she Uncle Stephen's guest, then?"

"Oh, decidedly! He waved a wand and produced her out of nowhere at all—and he refused to give any further particulars. That's all we know about Mary!"

"Well, Uncle Steve's not an idiot!" young Mr. Valmer proclaimed warmly, although somewhat dizzily. "He usually knows what he's about, and—"

"I'm not vilifying my own father," Edith said angrily. "Wiser men than he have been victimized by a pretty woman, haven't they? Since he retired, dad's grown—well, peculiar. There's no other way of putting it, John. You don't realize it, because you haven't been around. One never knows just what he's going to do next, or when he's about to fly off in a terrific rage, or—"

"One never did," John chuckled; "but they're good, honest rages, as a rule, and when he does a thing he knows why he's doing it."

"That's just it! When he was in business, there was a purpose—I mean a normal one—to the things he did. Since he retired, his mind's gone on functioning along the same lines, with nothing normal to work on. When he brought this woman, and—"

"Oh, I say—'this woman!' That always has a mean ring!" Dinsmore protested. "Getting Johnny quite mad, too, you know. Always stood up for the fundamental soundness of the race, and all that, Johnny did. Seems almost as if we might wait till Mary turns up and let her speak for herself. That reminds me of a story."

"Oh, we're to change the subject, are we?" Edith asked.

"Charitable thing to do, eh?"

"Go on with your story," Mrs. Dinsmore

said, although one who knew her would have noted that she was subsiding only for the time.

XV

"GIRL's gone!" Mr. Valmer stated, from the depths of his library chair, when Penning finally settled down on the other side of the table.

"Eh? Oh, Mary? Yes, Barton asked me if I'd seen her. Where's she gone?"

"Damn it, if I knew that I wouldn't be wondering! She didn't turn up for lunch, Penning."

"Very likely gone for a walk, and some of your friends picked her up in a car. Then they blew out a tire, or cracked a rear end, ninety miles from nowhere," the attorney said, somewhat intelligently, as he laid his papers out in orderly array. "Now, as to this agreement with the—"

"That's possible, too!" Stephen muttered. "Perhaps you'd better telephone a few garages, and—well, Barton?"

"This is a note for you, I think, sir."

"Is it? All right! Leave it on the table. Now, Penning?"

"Mrs. Dwight found it on Miss Allers's desk, sir," the butler explained further, and moved away.

"The dickens she did!" exclaimed Stephen, and reached for it hurriedly. "What in the name of common sense is the girl writing me notes about? Why didn't she—*what?"*

"Good Lord, Valmer!" gasped the attorney, with an excess of melodramatic effect. "What is it?"

"She's gone!"

"Gone?" echoed Mr. Penning, and threw up his hands. Then, having sufficiently cleared himself, in Stephen's sight, of any possible knowledge of her going, he asked more easily: "What does she say?"

"Huh?" grunted Mr. Valmer, who was a light purple now. *"There!"*

The note, hurled across the table, just missed hitting Mr. Penning's nose. He caught it deftly and considered it gravely.

"'I never can thank you sufficiently, but I have gone where I belong—to my own people,'" he muttered. "Well, well, well! That's—concise, isn't it?"

"Why did she go, Penning?" Stephen rasped. "Has any one been making things unpleasant for her?"

"Pshaw! No!" said the attorney positively. "She went because—"

"Gratitude, eh?" Mr. Valmer put in. The color of his purple was growing deeper. "I took that girl and did everything that mortal could do for her—selfishly in a way, perhaps, but I did it nevertheless. I asked of her nothing except that she should accept my hospitality and permit me to watch her. *Gratitude!"*

In his own cozy and comfortable little home, over his own cozy and comfortable little luncheon, Mr. Penning had devoted some thought to this impending moment. Now he managed what he felt was just the right smile, and proceeded in what he felt was just the right, soothing way:

"Well, one mustn't expect too much of that, Mr. Valmer. It's a queer old world, after all, and we fellows who are a bit idealistic have to look for an occasional unpleasant shock, I've found. Possibly it's all for the best. Water's bound to find its level." Here he stopped and leaned across the table for a better look at Stephen Valmer, whose color just now was quite the most remarkable Mr. Penning had ever observed. "I say, sir! You're not — not ill?"

"Ill? Hell, no!" Stephen hurled at him.

Mr. Penning stared on, with genuine and rapidly growing concern. Of all the black rages which his highly esteemed client had exhibited in the course of twenty years, this one was by far the blackest. There was an incessant, volcanic rumbling within Stephen, the veins stood out on his temples, and his hands actually shook.

When a man of his age permitted himself to reach such a stage of utter fury, the very worst is possible. To Mr. Penning's unscientific eye, in fact, the very worst seemed to be rushing down upon Stephen. The attorney spoke swiftly:

"See here, sir! If you're going to feel like that about it, I'll get down to her home and see if she's there. They still live in the same place, I believe. Yes, I mailed a check there last week. I'll bring her back, and—"

"No!"

"Oh, but I will, because—"

"No!" thundered Stephen.

"But I think—"

"I won't believe it!" the master of the house stated, with some difficulty.

"That she's gone? Well, apparently—"

"That my judgment of the girl is so utterly wrong—that the whole thing's a failure, after all, and that one can't develop such material past the point of wanting to return to its pit!" sizzled from Mr. Valmer. "I'll give her forty-eight hours!"

"In which to—"

"Come back here of her own accord! And in that time I forbid you, or any one else, to approach her in any way. If she has the character, she'll be back!"

"And if—if she hasn't?" the attorney risked.

"I'll pick another girl, with a damned sight more care, and try again!" said his client.

Mr. Penning started, and then sighed. Having sighed a second time, he gathered himself with quiet determination.

"Well, as to that, I should consider the whole subject very carefully before trying again, sir," he said evenly, quite disregarding the fact that Stephen's fingers were drumming steadily on the arms of his chair, and that the rich man's veins, far from subsiding, were swelling even larger. "That is to say, I should make a very careful study of all that has been written on that and similar subjects, and all that has been done in the way of actual research work. You'll find that a great source of pleasure, I am sure. It might even be a good idea to go abroad for a year. Some of the French psychologists, I believe, have made—"

"Penning, dry up!" croaked Stephen.

"But I'm pointing out that—"

The master of the house whirled about in his chair. In his fiery eye there was a quality so formidable that the attorney literally shrank away.

"Dry up!" roared Mr. Valmer.

It was at almost the same time that Ina Fayles, returning to the sun parlor from a trip upstairs—a trip which had been prolonged far beyond the period required for any ordinary search for a handkerchief—startled the trio by her own remarkable expression. Ina's eyes sparkled something that surely looked like satisfaction, and her cheeks were an excited pink.

"Mary's gone!" she cried.

"Well, that's not news," said her sister.

"No, but I mean—Edie, you remember that little pigskin suit case she had? You noticed it, I remember."

"Yes?"

"Well, that's missing. There was a pigskin tag on it, with her name and address—this address, I mean. The tag is lying on the floor of her closet now, and two of her upper drawers are quite empty. I saw her arranging them yesterday, and asked her if she wasn't putting too much in them," Mrs. Fayles pursued swiftly. "Her wastebasket's almost full, too. All the papers and letters she had must be in it, all torn up in tiny pieces!"

Young Mr. Valmer rose with a decided snort.

"Say! Have you been snooping around her room all this time, prying through her personal belongings and picking over her wastebasket, to discover all this?" he demanded contemptuously.

Neither Ina Fayles nor her sister gave the slightest heed to him or his indignation. The latter lady's unconcealed pleasure exceeded even that of her sister, as she leaned forward with an incredulous—

"Then she really *has* cleared out?"

"She has indeed, Edie! There isn't a doubt of it!"

"Well, I'll say she showed darned good taste in getting out!" John commented disgustedly, as he strode from the room.

XVI

Well chosen veneer is pretty, and hand-rubbed polishes can be made very attractive; but, after all, we are built of the basic things, and after even the highest flight, good, solid, comforting old earth is always waiting below. Mary was not much given to tearful manifestations, but her first ten minutes at home were devoted to unrestrained weeping in her mother's thin arms.

For a time, that rather futile and bewildered little creature could do no more than croon over her child as she held Mary tight and smoothed her hair, the while hazily admiring its new, sleek beauty and very pleasing arrangement; but presently it came to Mrs. Allers that something must be distinctly wrong. There were sternness and more than a little concern in her third repetition of the question:

"What is it, May? What's happened to you?"

Mary controlled her sobbing and snuggled closer.

"May, has anybody done anything to hurt you, an' what is it they done?"

"Nobody has, mother," Mary smiled somewhat damply. "I've just come to my senses, and come home."

"Took ye some time," Mr. Carter commented from his corner.

Mary sat upright and laughed.

"Didn't it, granddad? What does that matter, so long as I have come to them at last?"

"But you ain't really planning to stay down here permanent, May?" her mother asked.

"I am indeed!"

"Ain't you foolish? You got everything so nice up there at Mr. Valmer's, and it seems like they want to have you with them. You got everything grand like you couldn't ever have it here, even if papa does make pretty good money, and—"

"Mother, listen!" said Mary. "I think that I was mostly plain idiot, years ago. I wanted so many things so badly, and I had no real way of judging whether they'd be worth while or not. I suppose a lot of people are like that, and very few of them get what they think they want. Well, I did get everything—and right now all I want is to come back home here and stay. I belong here, and I don't belong there—that's all there is to it!"

"Yes, but—but it does seem, May—" her mother murmured.

"I'm all done with things that seem!" Mary stated. "Hereafter all I ask is the things that are. Where are the lunch dishes, mother? Let's get at 'em!"

"Oh—oh, me an' father just had a couple of plates, May," her mother protested. "You hadn't ought to be washing dishes in that pretty dress."

"Oh, but I want to help you to-day. I shan't be around to-morrow noon, I hope."

"Why?"

"Is Eggers still at the shop, mother?"

"I—yes, I believe he is."

"Then he'll give me back my old job, I'm sure, and by this time to-morrow I'll have packed so many hundreds of little brass boxes that—"

"May!" gasped her parent. "You ain't goin' back *there?*"

"I am, if they'll have me."

"But that — that's silly, May! After all you've learned, an' your nice clothes, an' so on! To look at you now, May, nobody'd ever guess you'd ever worked in a factory. Oh, I don't see no sense in goin' back *there!*"

"Well, I know what you mean, mother, and you're right. I can't quite explain it, because I'm not sure I understand it myself, but I want to go back and begin all over again, just where I dropped the old life. A little later, if a good chance comes along, I'll get out of it and into something better—or something more polite and fussy, anyway, but it won't be a bit better. Just for now, I want to go back!"

She was a very firm and splendid young creature, quite sure of her own mind, whatever doubts she may have expressed. Her mother sighed.

"Well, of course, May—" said she. "Only, it does seem—oh, I dunno!"

Jenny, precisely according to the old schedule, arrived home just ten minutes before Bill Allers. She screamed, ostensibly with glee, and threw her arms about Mary and hugged her. To Mary's keen ear there seemed the smallest hint of insincerity in that scream, and there was a well defined suspicion that, after a perfunctory hug, Jenny drew back and looked her over, as to raiment, with a sharp, appraising, and not unenvious eye. Oh, she *was* absurd! Mary hugged Jenny Ross again.

"It ain't possible the princess is here for dinner?" the latter young woman inquired, with slight acerbity. "What d'ye know?"

"The princess is here for good," Mary replied heartily.

"She's what?"

"I've come home."

"My Gawd!" breathed Miss Ross. "What slipped?"

"Nothing did. I've had enough luxury. I'm going back to my old job, if I can get it again."

"You can get it, all right. Eggers has been short-handed this last six months. He was beefin' about it to-day, but—listen, kid! *Who is he?*"

"What?"

"I'm gettin' it!" Miss Ross explained sagely. "Him an' you was gettin' on fine till the scrap started; an' then, you bein' so grand an' elegant, the way you are now, even a guy with a billion dollars couldn't hand you nothin' rough without endin' it forever!"

"Oh!" Miss Allers protested.

"May, you're a nut!" said her friend. "Rich or poor, they ain't so easy to get any more. You take that from me! You got to chain 'em to a hydrant, if you ever want to see 'em again, nowadays. An' you, with diamonds for buttons, an' ice cream three times a day, an' a Rolls-Royce to ride in, you go chuck it an' fly up in the air because this guy—aw, May, you gimme a pain!"

"Well, I'm sorry for that, but there isn't any guy," Mary explained cheerily.

This, very plainly, carried no conviction whatever. Miss Ross, having examined her from shoes to collar, sighed and shrugged, and then grew eager with—

"Your trunk here yet?"

"My—"

"Because I got to give the real rags the once over, soon as we're through dinner," Jenny explained avidly. "You know, you can't get real style no more, not even in the department stores. A girl like me, f'r instance, that can wear clothes right, ain't got—May, are you unpacked yet?"

"No, and I shan't be, because I have no trunk to unpack," Mary flared oddly. "I've got what I have on—and it's the cheapest thing I've had since I left home—and what few odds and ends I need for the next day or two. After that I'll earn what I wear!"

Head up, she hurried away to help her mother. Miss Ross gazed pensively after her for a moment, and then fluffed her hair and smiled wisely at the aged Mr. Carter.

"That must 'a' been some scrap—huh, pop?" said she.

Mr. Allers himself appeared very shortly, and embraced his daughter with divers exclamations of astonishment. It was evidently Bill's impression, too, that Mary was favoring them with her society for dinner only. When he learned that her stay bade fair to be permanent, he grew suddenly rather blank and preoccupied. Mary winced and caught herself, and smiled brightly.

As has been noted, Bill was genuinely fond of his child in his own crude way, and he contrived a number of labored jokes upon her apparent descent in the social scale that evening; yet after those first few minutes he certainly did not effervesce.

Dinner itself, by no means a failure, still somehow fell short of complete success. Jenny set the table, absently and mechanically, laying only four places, as usual. When the error was discovered, Mary's mother grew flustered, and bustled about in search of a fifth chair. It appeared that the fifth chair of the humbler sort had been broken some two years ago, and Mary ended by perching upon a noisy confection from the parlor, all gilt paint, with a vividly pink brocaded seat.

There was, rather unfortunately, abundant cabbage this evening, and—oh, well, why not be honest with one's self and admit, very privately, that one loathed cabbage just as much now as at any previous period? Mary ate sparingly, and still with a showy pretense of hearty enjoyment.

Jenny's bright eye penetrated the pretense, and she commented quite caustically. Bill, the matter brought thus to his attention, essayed further jokes, which dealt with the sort of food to which Mary had probably grown accustomed these last three years, notably larks' tongues on toast and the fricasseed teeth of hens, the latter being extremely rare, and so reserved for the very rich.

Grandfather coughed wonderfully. He had added two distinctly new effects since Mary's departure—a thin, shrill, whistling wheeze, done on the intake, and suggesting nothing but onrushing and inescapable death, and a trumpeting note which fairly tore through one's eardrums and battered relentlessly on the brain beyond. Bill stared blackly, and Bill's wife ran for water, quite as of yore; and, the upheaval past, Mr. Carter properly assured them that nothing whatever could be done for his cough.

Then Jenny took to chattering, not very interestingly, of matters at the shop; and for no reason under the sun, and quite unperceived by the others, one single tear came from Mary's eye, rolled down her cheek, and was captured by her napkin. Oh, no—she was not sorry for herself. Mary's sympathies did not run in that direction, even with cause. Certainly she was not sorry for her family, there being no reason for that. But—

"You let Jenny help mamma with them dishes, May," Bill said, when they had risen.

"Oh, Jenny's been helping her so long, and I—"

"That's all right—ain't it, Jen? Sure it is!" pursued Mr. Allers. "An' your pop ain't seen you in years, kid. I'd like to have a little talk." He looked them over meditatively for a second. "Come on in the parlor, May," he said suddenly.

Mary followed rather wonderingly. Mr. Allers, after some warranted hesitation and a glance at the stuffy hangings, lit his pipe and crossed his legs.

"Well, well!" said he. "So the kid's back, hey?"

"The kid's back," Mary said briefly.

"What was the trouble?"

"There wasn't any, really."

"Did they want you to stay, kid, an' still you come back?"

"They did, I think, but I belong here."

Mr. Allers rubbed his large knee.

"Seems sort o' foolish to me, May," he submitted.

"It doesn't to me," Mary said firmly.

"Well, I know, but—"

Silence fell suddenly upon them, persisting for half a minute.

"Suppose you could go back, if you wanted?" Bill asked abruptly.

"Do you want me to do that, dad?" returned Mary.

"Want you to? Why, why—hell, no!" Mr. Allers puffed. "Man's got just the one kid, it ain't likely he wants her anywhere but home—till she gets married, that is. I—I suppose you been meeting a lot o' fine young fellers?"

"That's not what you were going to say," said Mary.

Mr. Allers's eyes opened wide, and he smiled rather foolishly.

"Why, no. Something just occurred to me. I—"

"Well?"

"Well, say, listen, May, an' don't get this wrong," her father said earnestly, albeit with the sheepish grin persisting. "You used to twist things so—I dunno if you're still like that or not, but what just crossed my mind is—your pay's been comin' in regular, you know."

"Yes," Mary said, with the smallest shudder.

"So if you were worrying about that, or thinkin' maybe it was your duty to come back an' go to work—"

"What have you been doing with that money, dad?"

"Huh? Why—well, say, it ain't gone to waste, May. We got a Ford car now, you know, don't you? Sure! Jen wrote you about that, I remember. Yep, we have some fine old rides, Sundays. An' I been payin' on a couple o' lots out on Long Island, May. What d'ye know about *that?* Matter o' fact, got 'em all paid for, an' a little something laid aside to start buildin' next year, if things come down a little. No palace, you know, but I'm puttin' down nine hundred cash an'—well, the fact is, I'd ought to put down two thousand cash, because that makes it a sight easier to pay off the rest. I—I was sort o' plannin' to do that, too."

"If I hadn't come home, you mean?"

"Well, May, I—I think you must be plumb crazy to come back to this, when you got things the way I understand you got 'em up there. It ain't as if you *had* to come back here just yet. That 'd be different, an'—"

"Oh!" breathed his daughter.

"Well, all right, then, if you have to look at me that way!" Bill said desperately. "A thing like this happens to maybe one family in a million, once in a thousand years! Why chuck it just when I'm gettin' ready to build a home for—"

Mary had risen suddenly.

"I'm going back to work to-morrow," said her small and not too steady voice. "I'll put every last penny I can spare into the building fund, dad. I — I'd love to have our own home outside the city, no matter how little it is. I'm going to help mother now."

"Yeah, but that ain't the point," Bill muttered, as she disappeared. "This stuff is all velvet, the way it's been comin' in; an' once it stops, it ain't goin' to start up again—an' that's no dream! An' you'll have to spend anyway ten or twelve dollars a week for yourself, an'—a-a-ah!"

Jenny had an appointment with her very latest young man, and presently she appeared, all painted and powdered. She visibly considered asking Mary to become one of the party, but discarded the idea as visibly and very firmly. There was something—well, different about Mary; and this particular young man was not any too easy to hold, as it was. Jenny, then, excused herself and vanished, and Mary spent a quiet evening at home.

Her grandfather, his years accumulating, had taken to dozing after dinner. He did it characteristically, accompanying his dreams with a thin, vicious, persistent snore that was none too soothing.

Some wizard of salesmanship had contrived to unload upon Bill Allers a set of books, purporting to give one who would devote a single hour nightly to their pages the equivalent of a university training and a few years of travel. Even now, in his eleventh month, Bill had waded into the second volume; but he brooked no conversation while he did his reading.

Bill's wife had socks and stockings to darn—a mountain of them. Darning, she hummed a little tune of her own composition, without beginning and without end.

Here and there she asked a rather pointless question of Mary, and seemed to pay no great heed to the reply. Spiritually, Mary's meager mother had been alone so long that her need for human contact had all but reached the zero mark. Watching her, a shamed, nameless sense of guilt came over Mary, and her heart ached.

She was in bed when Jenny returned and lit the gas.

In the old, informal way, Miss Ross examined Mary's raiment. In the process, her nostrils grew a little wider and her eyes a little narrower. Jenny bought more than she could afford, for her own decoration, but her wildest extravagances had never approached the limits to which Mr. Valmer's purse might be stretched. Mary watched her and flushed, and turned away, feigning sleep; but the undeceived Miss Ross, the light out again, and the covers tucked about her, plunged into a low-toned conversation.

" May! Why'd you leave?"

" I didn't like it."

" Why not?"

" Oh, they—the women smoked, and—and everybody seemed to drink, and—it's quite the usual thing to hug every woman in sight, once you're out of sight with her, and—oh, I don't know!"

" You didn't *like* it?" Miss Ross queried amazedly.

" No."

For two long minutes Miss Ross meditated in the darkness.

" No, but on the level, May," said she, " why *did* you quit?"

" I told you," Mary replied coldly.

" Oh! Tut, tut! Naughty, naughty! Just like that, huh?" said Jenny, with considerable feeling. " Well, I'll certainly be the last person to stick my nose into another person's affairs, May. At the same time, seein' how long me an' you was pals, May, which we had practically no thoughts the other wasn't sharing for years—well, it shows you how a person can get when they get a smell o' the real kale, huh? Thank Gawd, I'm still poor! I ain't much, May, but this I will say for myself—with me a frien' is a frien'!"

" I didn't mean to offend you, Jenny," Mary said wretchedly.

" Oh, my deah! My *deah* May-ree!" Miss Ross protested, attaining the very pinnacle of biting sarcasm. " Say no more! Say no more!"

Other minutes passed, while Jenny breathed heavily.

" How are all the girls, Jen?" Mary asked softly.

" What girls?"

" In the shop, honey."

A difficult instant, and Miss Ross seemed to relent.

" Ain't any of 'em you'll know, no more," said she. " Only me an' Ray Cohen an' Sarah Buck's left in that room. Huh? No, they wasn't fired; they left. This, now, Kenwick Brass Company started up in the small stuff, an' they wanted trained girls, so they sent a couple o' scouts around an' got our bunch. Say, Eggers was wild! Say, you never seen him real wild, May, till that day! Sylvie got married, you know."

" Yes?"

" Sure! Some hick—funny-lookin' pill, at that. Nothin' to make Rudy Valentino get jealous, you know. We thought she was crazy. I unnerstan' he has a farm in Connecticut, with a lot o' cows, you know. Maybe she wasn't so crazy, at that. Little Freda got married, too. Delicatessen up on Amsterdam Avenue. They say Freda's got to wait on the store, too. Can you beat that, May? Her that always had to have a taxi if some poor fish was takin' her to a dance—delicatessen! Ha! Oh, yeah, an' Ethel Wilson got married, too. What d'ye know about *that?*" said Jenny, growing quite sociable again, and turning over to face Mary. " With her face an' the way she dresses, May! Can you imagine? An' that ain't the half of it. He's a swell-lookin' guy—not so big, but a lot o' pep, an' snappy clothes, May. He's got a garage over in Jersey, an' Ethel has her own car—*Ethel!* No, it ain't a tin Lizzie; it's some classy little boat, May. Some guy went broke that was storin' there, an' Ethel's man took it over for two hundred dollars. That's Ethel, you know, that used to walk fifty blocks to save a nickel, an'—"

Suspicion evidently rising within her, Miss Ross paused. Mary did not implore her to proceed.

" Don't you think Eggers was right?" Jenny asked tentatively.

" Why, yes, of course!" replied Mary's startled voice.

Miss Ross turned back on her other side with a savage flop.

" Ah, you give me a pain in the neck!" she stated candidly.

Following this, there was permanent silence of the most oppressive nature.

Twice Mary opened her lips, to begin the decent placating of Jenny; twice she abandoned the idea. Thoughts were pounding down on Mary, there in the dark, and she was growing rather terrified.

She was at home. That was what she had craved, only this morning; but she was not happy. Her unhappiness bore no resemblance at all to the discontent that had preceded her first desertion. That had been a feverish and perhaps a rather stupid rebellion. This was plain misery! Mrs. Fairson had contrived to change her too completely, and—oh, it wasn't that, of course. At any rate, one shouldn't be blaming the excellent Mrs. Fairson, however subconsciously.

No, rather was it that in the remote period that had known her last resting in this same bed, Mary had been a distinctly selfish and self-centered young person—and now she was paying. Nature is merciless. Few of her creatures can return and crawl back comfortably into the same old shell, after years of wandering beyond its confines. The house was just as sordid and ugly and—oh, that would be remedied, of course, as soon as her father's building plans matured; but—well, he wasn't particularly glad to have her back. His first thought had been of what it would cost.

And her poor little mother—well, in cold, bitter truth, nothing mattered very much to mother, one way or the other. Mary, just then, would have given a great deal if only her mother had been moved to tiptoe into the room for a glance at her daughter.

"Did you wind the clock, Bill?" asked a monotonous voice, instead, and there was the closing of a door and deeper stillness.

Mary sighed shakily. She had abandoned them all very gayly, had she not? She had been full of hysterical gratitude at her escape. She had gone away to outgrow them—not deliberately to do that, perhaps, but to contrive it very effectively, nevertheless. As for the other side of the case, whatever gap she might have left in the household was healed over now.

Mary's lips tightened, by way of stilling their tremble. The companion of her dinner-time tear trickled down to her pillow.

XVII

But Mary was very much herself in the morning. Her first drowsy glance at the dusky ceiling brought an impression, curiously vivid, that the whole Valmer adventure had been a dream. Full realization, coming two or three seconds later, brought no sigh of regret—which was surely encouraging. On few mornings, indeed, had she felt more eager to reach the Mors Stamping Mill and get to work.

She roused Jenny very merrily, and that young woman, after a dark stare, nodded and sat up. Mary sat down suddenly beside her.

"Jen, I didn't mean to make you angry last night," she said earnestly. "Please forgive me!"

Jenny shrugged and yawned.

"Forgive what, May?"

"Whatever it is you have to forgive. I had the blues last night."

"Should say you might have!" commented Miss Ross, thrusting her slender legs from the bed. "Gettin' back to the simple life like this, when you might better have stayed up there, an'—aw, forget it!"

"Is it all right, then?"

"Why not?" Miss Ross demanded, with exceeding sourness. "You're different. That's all right. That's what you went away for—to get different. What is it to me if you're different, May? I got my own frien's."

"Well—only I wish you didn't feel that way about it," Mary murmured, without overwhelming concern, as she scuttled off.

"Where you goin' in such a hurry?" Jenny inquired.

"Bath!" said her departing friend, from the doorway.

Her distinctly red lips in a cynical curl, Miss Ross stared at the floor for some time before beginning her own dressing. When finally she reached for her stockings, she laughed rather nastily.

Still, whatever the true nature of her personal hatchet, she seemed to have buried it by the time they started for the shop. She chattered along quite naturally, and Mary, who learned easily, contrived to display a degree of interest which won her more than a single inquiring glance.

"You want me to ask Eggers will he take you on?" Jenny said, as they entered the Mors establishment. "I got quite some drag with him now, May."

"I'll ask him myself," Mary laughed. "There he is now."

Mr. Eggers, indeed, was staring directly at her and grinning broadly. His hat on the back of his head, a partially masticated toothpick between his teeth, quite as usual, he advanced upon Mary, and even held out his hand.

"Well, if it ain't Allers!" he observed. "Hello, May! How's tricks? Long time since we seen you around here!"

Mary shook the hand heartily. Mr. Eggers looked her over with some care.

"Well, well, well! Do we look like about fifty million dollars? I'll tell the whole world we do!" he pursued in jocular vein. "What's the idea, May? Couldn't keep away from the old dump no longer? Shuffer waiting outside with your car, huh?"

"The idea is that I've come back here to get my old job," Mary said. "May I have it?"

"Go on!" cried the foreman. "Quit your kiddin', May! Lay off that stuff! What was it you done? You married a oil well, didn't you?"

"I didn't marry any one," Mary dimpled; "and I want my job. I need it."

"Is that right?" Mr. Eggers asked, with real concern. "Did you lose the good one you had—or whatever it was?"

"Yes!"

Eggers removed his toothpick and carefully scratched his head with it.

"Well, it ain't started you drinkin' the iodine, anyway, kid," he reflected, somewhat perplexed. "Sure you can have your job, May. Mighty glad to get you back. You was always one o' the best girls in the shop. Want to start now?"

"May I?"

"Come on an' I'll fix you up a time card," the foreman said.

Jenny had been quite accurate in saying that the old girls were gone. The quick glances that greeted Mary from various chairs came mainly from eyes which had first seen the light of day on the far side of the Atlantic, and they were not too friendly.

No other detail of the room had altered, however. The square foot of plaster was still missing from the wall just opposite Mary's place. The same piece of twine held the electric bulb at the same angle over her portion of the table. The little brass boxes were the same, and so were the piles of thick tissue in which they were to be wrapped.

Mary took to speculating upon brass boxes. Why, millions upon millions of them must have gone through here since her last appearance—boxes for rouge, boxes for creams, boxes for powder, boxes for paper fasteners, boxes that would be enameled, boxes that would be plated, and still other boxes destined only to be stamped with the name of this firm or that, and—well, that was the second box she had dropped to the floor!

"Psst!" said the girl on her other side. "You dented that one! Chuck it in the basket under the table."

"'S matter, May?" Jenny asked. "Got butter on your fingers?"

"They don't seem to be just as nimble as they were once upon a time, do they?" Mary mused.

"No? You'll come back, all right," Miss Ross assured her cheeringly.

Outside, in the body of the factory, presses thumped on, softly and incessantly. Eggers strolled through at regular intervals, keeping an eye on the lank boy who loaded the strawboard cartons upon his little truck and trundled them away. The boy was a stranger, but his duties were precisely the same as his predecessor's, and he went through them in the same mechanical way.

"*Pshaw!*" breathed Mary, and picked up three little boxes that she had dropped.

"Hey! For the love o' Mike, May!" Jenny protested very softly. "Have a heart!"

"Well, I'm not doing it on purpose, you know," Mary said, not without annoyance. "They—they slip."

"Sure they slip, but that ain't goin' to get you nothin'! Eggers is crazy about these two numbers we're packin', May. They got a jinx on 'em. The dies was all wrong, an' they had to get special ones made. Then they got some bum stock, an' that wrecked three thousand of 'em yesterday. An' there's some penalty on not gettin' the stuff delivered on time, on this order, an'—"

"Say, May!" Eggers said quietly, over her shoulder.

"Well?"

"Don't ruin no more'n you can help," the foreman said, and his tone grew sharper. "The old man was razzin' me pretty hard about this lot of goods not ten minutes ago, and he's got his eye on this packin' room, personal!"

"All right," said Mary, with a nervous little smile.

Ridiculous, of course; but Miss Allers put her whole attention on the task of wrapping little brass boxes without sending them hurtling across the place. For an hour she succeeded admirably. Two hours passed, and noon was approaching; and Mary, anxious as she had been to go back to the shop, rejoiced at its approach. She wished to stroll out, with an arm around Jenny, to the cheap little restaurant down the block, and see no more boxes for a while.

Three years made a difference in one's dexterity, even in this kind of work. Still, she was getting back into the habit of it. She—

"Oh, May!" said Jenny.

"Yes?"

"I forgot to tell you!"

"What?"

"About—well, maybe you don't remember him, anyway."

"Who is he?"

"Jim Hammond. Remember him?"

"I—yes, I think I do," Mary said, looking at her work.

"He quit."

"He did?"

"Huh? Sure! Yesterday."

"Why?"

"I couldn't say, May," said Jenny, as her deft fingers whisked on. "I unnerstan' he ain't comin' back. I was speakin' to Joey Cullen just when we come in, an' he told me. Say, I could learn to love that man, May—I mean Jimmy, not Joey. There's somethin' so grand about him that —hey, *May!* What the—" Miss Ross concluded, with a gasp.

There was no telling just how it had happened, but it had happened, nevertheless. May's pile of boxes—the beautifully burnished ones, too—had left *en masse* for the too attractive floor. Clattering, tinkling, becoming scratched and dented, they were rolling here and there and everywhere.

Mary, with a little cry, was out of her chair and picking them up. Jenny dropped her own work and went on her knees beside Mary.

"Say, Allers!" said the hard voice of Mr. Eggers.

"I—yes?"

"You pick up the rest o' them boxes, Ross," the foreman directed sharply, and nodded toward his rude little office. "Come in here, Allers. I want to speak to you private."

He walked ahead and waited, unsmiling, until Mary had entered. He closed the door.

"Allers," he said pointedly, "I guess you're not so good any more, huh?"

"Oh, I'm sorry! I'm—horribly sorry!" said Mary. "It shan't happen again."

"You said a mouthful that time, May," Mr. Eggers observed dryly. "There ain't goin' to be no chance for it to happen again. The old man heard that earthquake, kid. He sent me out. All bets are off!"

"What does that mean?"

"Well, it means we'll have to let you go, Allers. Too bad! I'd 'a' liked to keep you on, but this special bunch o' goods—it's like murder, putting a scratch on one piece, even. How much is it we owe you? Around two twenty, ain't it? Well, I'll get it for you."

"You're not really discharging me?"

"You ain't getting dumb, are you, Allers?" the foreman asked.

"But that's not fair! That's unjust! It's so long since—"

"Listen, May!" Eggers interrupted, not unkindly. "I guess it wouldn't make such a lot of difference, even if you stayed a couple o' days. You ain't in this class no more, May. You kind o' feel above it. Well, now, wait! Maybe you don't know that yourself, kid, but it sticks out all over you. Yes, that's right, it does. If it was only me, I'd keep you on and give you a try-out, but the old man no more'n heard that last one when he told me to fire the girl that done it, and—oh, you can see where I stand, May!" he ended.

"Yes, I can—see," said Mary's faint voice.

Noon was still some fifteen minutes distant when she found herself in the sunshine again—without a job. Yes, and without *that* kind of job! Three years ago, the thing would have been sufficiently distressing, of course, and probably a source of hot anger. To-day it was bewildering! Further than this, in her rather tangled mental state of the moment, Mary seemed unable to reach.

She was as much averse as ever to self-analysis, yet it behooved her to try something of the kind now. What *was* the matter? It wasn't merely a case of losing a little deftness of finger. It was more than that.

Was it that she had been educated past the point where factory work was possible?

Mary flatly declined to believe anything of the kind. Why, if that had happened, she must have been trained into a state where the country club variety of life—the Bobby Parks and Wells Dinsmore kind of life—was the only thing for her! She refused to regard it as possible.

Yet, since one must sometimes be honest with one's self, there was no denying that her heart had dropped steadily after her entrance to the packing room. Well, that was because the girls were all different, of course, and because—oh, she didn't know the reason!

At the corner, Mary stopped and bit her lips. The right thing would be to march straight on east, where there were factories galore, and hunt down another job. She shuddered at the prospect, and ended by trailing slowly homeward.

Her mother stared amazedly.

"Why, May! You—you ain't sick?"

"I'm fired!" May said, smiling with some difficulty.

"*Whuzzat?*" demanded Mr. Carter.

"Couldn't go the pace without a little practice, and Eggers wasn't willing to let me get back to form in the firm's time," Mary pursued gloomily. "It was mean of him, because—what's the matter with *you*, mother?"

"Me? Nothing! I'll get you some lunch right away, May."

"You've been crying!"

"Darned near twenty-seven years ago I told your mamma that Bill Allers wasn't no more the man for her to marry than—" Mr. Carter began vociferously.

It was suddenly plain that Mary had stumbled into a discussion of her father.

"What did dad do?" Mary demanded, and took her mother in her arms. "Anything—really?"

The form of Mrs. Allers, which might have been responsive, remained quite limp.

"Oh, he does carry on so when he gets an idea, May!" she sighed, for equivocation was beyond her range. "*I* think you done right, May. I *do!*"

"In—in coming home, you mean?"

"Certainly! If you wanted to come, May—an' it's certainly your place—"

"And dad doesn't like it?"

"Oh, he—well, yes, he does, I guess; but he—"

"The money Mr. Valmer's been paying him every week—is that it?"

"He—yes, May. You can't blame papa so much, neither. He's worked hard, and he ain't been able to save much, even with wages high, May—and you, too, father. Bill's worked hard; and then this money began to come in just like something in a fairy story, and he's been saving it. He has, May. He ain't wasted one cent."

"He told me," May said thickly.

"About the house?"

"Yes."

"Well, then!" said her mother, in pathetic triumph. "You can't blame papa so much for feeling—"

"But I can, because he has no real right to it!" Mary exploded. "It's not as if it was something that really belonged to him. It has been coming just because Mr. Valmer—is Mr. Valmer, I suppose. Father hasn't earned it, and I haven't earned it. That's just one of the things that made me want to come back home and go to work—so that would *stop!*"

"The—check every week?" her mother said blankly.

"Yes, of course! It's not right! It isn't even decent!"

"Well, but, May—"

"I never quite realized how wrong and absurd it all was, until a day or two ago, mother. Honestly, I never did! Mrs. Fairson's been keeping me so busy, all these years, that I never gave much thought to it. Even when I mentioned it to her, once or twice, she said that it was all right. I suppose I was too greedy for what she was teaching me to waste much energy in worrying over it; but just in the little time I've been at Valmer's—well, it's ridiculous, mother, to let that old man go on paying father money to which he has no right!"

"Much as said that same thing m'self!" Mr. Carter contributed. "'Bill,' I says, 'you know darn well it ain't right to play a sucker like that all—'"

"Well, an' now, you can't blame papa so much!" Mrs. Bill persisted weakly. "He's always wanted a house so bad!"

"I can blame him for the principle of getting it that way!"

"But still, May, if you'd stayed on there a while longer—"

Mary's lips tightened. Her mother, studying them, sat down and laid her hands, palms upward, on her lap.

"Well, I dunno, May," she concluded helplessly.

Shortly she set about getting lunch, but Mary seemed to be elsewhere. When the plates were on the table, she looked about and called:

"May! Where are you?"

"In my room."

"What are you doin', May?"

"I'm packing," Mary said briefly.

"Why, May!" said her mother, and there was something akin to relief in the tone.

XVIII

JOHN VALMER went for a walk.

John yearned for open air and solitude—or, at all events, for temporary relief from the society of his cousins. They hadn't changed a particle since his desertion of the Valmer home. They were the same purposeless, ornamental, spiteful young women they had been three years ago.

If anything, they were a trifle more irritating. They dared, for example, to discuss a girl like Mary, and to rejoice openly at her departure. For some odd reason, the fact that they were, after all, his cousins, and that he knew nothing whatever of Mary, did not appeal to John as having any bearing on the subject.

Rage smoldered redly within him. Not eight hours ago he had believed, and had freely confessed to himself and to his uncle, that he was rather tired of the lately valued proletariat, and quite ready to return to his own sphere. Now he suspected that he had been mistaken, and—well, what if Mary's absence *did* figure, however insignificantly, in the birth of the suspicion?

Facing the proposition squarely, as John tried to face all things, Mary had typified a new and better order of things in the Valmer house. If they had taken to associating with girls like Mary, it indicated a change of attitude. Only, as it now seemed, they had done nothing of the sort!

John walked entirely around the grounds, looking them over carefully, and assuring himself that he was no more than refreshing his memory of the place. He looked at all the secluded seats and behind most of the bushes; yet at the end of the journey his memory was not particularly refreshed.

Sauntering very casually, he wound up at the garage, where Jenkins was polishing away industriously on the closed car.

"Oh—ah—er—Jenkins!" yawned young Mr. Valmer. "Which train did Miss Allers go down on?"

"Miss Allers, sir?" echoed the chauffeur. He stood erect, and more or less daintily dashed the beads from his forehead with the back of his hand. "Did Miss Allers go to town, sir?"

"Didn't you take her to the station?"

"No, sir."

"Oh! That so?" murmured Mr. Valmer. "Oh, by the way, Jenkins, have her trunks gone down yet?"

The chauffeur shook his head.

"No, sir."

"Well, you have the tags, of course, for them. Where are they, Jenkins? I—er—believe there was an error in the address."

Once more the chauffeur shook his head.

"I haven't any tags, Mr. John," said he. "In fact, I haven't had any orders to take down the trunks, sir. Shall I see Barton and—"

"No, no!" said John. "Matter of no consequence at all, Jenkins. I'll see him myself."

After which he strolled on, at a still more leisurely gait, and Jenkins resumed his polishing.

Barton, by chance, was just crossing the open space behind the house. John, shielding another yawn with one hand, hailed him with the other.

"I say, Barton!" said John.

The butler turned toward young Mr. Valmer, his head inclined respectfully.

"Er—Miss Allers, you know. She's gone?"

"I understand so, sir," said the butler, shooting a swift glance at John and seeming, almost imperceptibly, to become alertly on guard.

"To be sure! About her trunks, I mean, Barton."

"Yes, Mr. John?"

"Where are the tags, please?"

"I couldn't say, sir."

"Who has them, then?"

"I couldn't say that, either, sir."

John drew breath.

"There was some—some mistake in the address, I believe, and I want to correct it before the trunks leave."

"Yes, Mr. John," said the butler's politely interested voice.

"Well, don't stand there like a confounded statue, Barton! Who—"

"I beg pardon, sir, but I know nothing about it," said the butler. "Mrs. Dwight has given me no word about moving trunks, Mr. John, and the young lady herself didn't mention leaving the house when I served her breakfast."

He resumed his staring. Young Mr. Valmer's countenance darkened slightly.

"Well, all right, then!" he said shortly, and turned away.

Suddenly he turned back, smiling, for a bright new idea had flashed upon him.

"Oh, Barton! The guest's mail—you still look after that?"

"To be sure, sir."

"Keep the forwarding addresses in the same little black book in the table drawer, do they?"

"In the corner of the hall—yes, sir."

"I'll just check up on that, then," stated Stephen's nephew, as he hurried away with no suggestion of a saunter.

The hall was pleasantly deserted, and—yes, the little black book was in its accustomed place. His smile brilliant, young Mr. Valmer turned the pages briskly. His smile departed as he came to the last entry, and he frowned in annoyance. That last entry, dated some three weeks back, noted merely that one Peggy Worthington, a peculiarly vapid fool of a woman in John's opinion, had journeyed on to the Hot Springs.

Not usually a profane person, John swore aloud.

Presently, however, he ceased his swearing, and grew quite frank with himself. Silly, perhaps, but he really did wish to see more of Mary—that was the whole proposition. She was one of the few girls who had ever managed to interest him; but he could not well see more of her without first discovering where she was.

One did not learn addresses, apparently, by mentioning imaginary tags or consulting futile address books. Barton did not seem to be in conversational mood on the subject of Miss Allers. Why? If it came to that, why this strange atmosphere of reticence, whenever Mary was mentioned?

John scowled at the floor. There couldn't be any real, unpleasant mystery about Mary. No more charmingly normal girl ever lived. This assumption of ignorance about her on the part of Mrs. Fayles and Mrs. Dinsmore was born of some variety of pique not yet clear to him—that was certain, too. One doesn't have a girl like Mary around and actually know nothing about her. The girl herself wouldn't tolerate a condition like that.

No doubt Ina and Edith had their reasons, whatever those reasons might be; and if John really wished to gather data about Mary, he would have to use a little more tact and patience. He strolled on, to the sun parlor again this time, where the shadows were growing long. A prodigious slyness was upon him, too. He entered with a grin as emptily good-natured as Dinsmore's own.

That gentleman dozed moodily. His wife and her sister, having put in the first entirely idle afternoon in several weeks, were visibly bored with the world and with each other. They glanced up at John and nodded wearily, as that young man lounged into a chair.

"Merry gathering, eh?"

"Frightfully!" Ina sighed.

"Still discussing your friend Mary?"

"I told you that she wasn't my friend."

"I know," said John, and his grin widened. "And—I say, Ina, as one cousin to another, just who *is* she?"

"I don't know."

"Well, but—where does she live, I mean?"

"I don't know."

"Put it in another way—where did she come from, Edith?"

"Thin air, so far as I'm informed," Mrs. Dinsmore said shortly. "I only hope that she's gone back to it to stay!"

"Oh, but that's all rot," John drawled. "What's the answer?"

Ina shrugged.

"None, I guess."

"But there must be an answer," John persisted, seeking to force just the right amount of reluctant interest into his voice. "Not likely that one would entertain a young woman she knows absolutely nothing about, eh?"

"It may not be likely, but it's what happened here," replied Ina.

"But—"

"Oh, ask dad, if you're so beastly curious about the smirking little rat!" Edith said unpleasantly. She rose, and yawned. "I'm going to dress."

Without comment, Ina rose too. They left.

Mr. Dinsmore grinned, and young Mr. Valmer, considering him, ground his teeth slightly. He loathed prodding into that particular personality for information, but—

"Popular kid, Mary, eh?" said Mr. Dinsmore, with a rich chuckle.

"Seems to be," observed John. "What was the trouble?"

" Trouble? None, that I heard of. But," said Mr. Dinsmore, and winked knowingly, " you got here a day too late, Jacky!"

" Why?"

" You should have known Mary while she was around—known her as well as *I* did!" said Edith's husband, and winked again.

In something less than one second, the slyness slipped from young Mr. Valmer. He turned suddenly on Mr. Dinsmore.

" As well as *you* did!" he said. " How well did *you* know her?"

" Ha, ha, my boy!" said Mr. Dinsmore, and chuckled further and wagged his head. "*That* would be—"

" Say, you know I've been working in a factory, don't you?"

" Eh?"

" Well, if you were down there, I'd—I'd follow the general practice and knock your damned block off!" the remarkable Mr. Valmer stated.

" Upon my word! Why?"

" For speaking like that—for looking like that when you mention—any woman, Dinsmore!" John said further, and clenched his fists.

Mr. Dinsmore rose suddenly, and made a rapid estimate of the distance to the various exits.

" What did you mean by it?" John asked evenly.

" Mean? Nothing! Nothing at all, old chap—you ought to know that. Hardly saw the girl, for that matter." Since the heavy fists were unclenching, and young Mr. Valmer was himself again, Mr. Dinsmore went so far as to add: " My word, Jacky, you're an odd fish, you know! Ought to get yourself a lance and a couple of plumes—and possibly a white horse and a tin suit of clothes as well—and go out and defend the giddy sex till somebody potted you. It's not done any longer!"

" Isn't it? It is by some of us," John said thickly, as he shut his teeth and strode out.

Dinsmore shook his head wonderingly.

" Peculiar chap — always was! Partly crazy, like his jolly old uncle. Erratic as the devil, just like his uncle. Always was that, too, wasn't he? He—why, hang him, anyway!" he murmured.

In the big, empty drawing-room, John grew decidedly calmer, albeit his eye still sparkled savagely. This last little quest, too, had failed. Just how—well, there was old Penning, passing the door. John dived back across the room, buttonholed the lawyer, and then met his startled stare with a wide and almost silly smile.

In point of fact, the young man had been about to demand the address of Mary Allers, but a flash of sanity seemed to have stayed his tongue. It was not quite likely that Penning had been reduced to the status of a social secretary.

" Er—hello!" John said heartily. " Just —er—wanted to say hello."

" Eh? Ah, yes—hello!" the attorney stammered. " Thought the place was on fire when you came dashing on me like that. Impulsiveness of youth, I suppose. How are you, John? Prodigal nephew's returned, eh?"

" Oh, yes," grinned John. " Uncle busy, do you know?"

Mr. Penning literally started. The corners of his mouth went down grimly, too, as he glanced at John.

" Why? Want to talk to him?"

" Yes. Why not?"

" Anything important?"

" Just a personal matter."

Mr. Penning looked about him nervously, and laid a hand on John's arm.

" Say! Do you want one of the most splendidly sound pieces of advice that any young man ever received, John?" he asked softly.

" What is it?"

" *Keep away from your uncle!*"

" Why?"

" Johnny, his temper is—up!"

" What about?"

" I'm not entirely certain; but it's up. I'm certain about that part," the lawyer grunted. " I've seen a number of his rages in my time, John, and a lot of 'em have been impressive; but this is, bar none, the most magnificent fit of rage he's ever managed! He's locked up in his den at present. He may be all right to-morrow—or he may not, of course. Whether your business is trivial or important, let him alone this day!"

" Well—thanks!" John sighed.

He frowned after the departing attorney, but he heeded the warning. Penning, you see, knew, and John knew that he knew.

Stephen Valmer failed to appear at dinner, which was not remarkable, for the younger element was entertaining informally that evening.

Some twelve or fourteen guests were there — vacuous people with whom John never had had, and never could have, anything in common. The inane, blond little being on his right chattered tirelessly at him, and rolled great blue eyes, and timidly asked his opinion upon virtually every subject in the world in which he had no trace of interest—for she had been out four seasons now, and was still unattached, and John's financial status was no secret.

On his other side sat a rather stout lady, who harbored the relatively harmless delusion that she was on her way into politics. She spoke accordingly, and at great length, frequently asking John to confirm her opinions—which he did drearily.

Later on, they danced, but they danced without John Valmer. The evening was clear and warm, and John, mysteriously vanished, was sitting down near the gates of the place on a certain stone bench, smoking and thinking.

They were still dancing when he entered the house by the side door, a long time past midnight; and for a while John watched them from a distance and listened to their chatting. He turned away, finally, with a disgusted little grin and a heavy sigh. They were, indeed, the same old crowd!

Nor did his disgust decrease or his tolerance grow, still later, as he sought to woo slumber. He realized poignantly that his room was almost directly over the drawing-room, and that the club orchestra, seemingly, had been engaged for the entire night.

In the morning, at an outrageously late hour, John awoke suddenly, after a prolonged dream of the Mors Stamping Works. He blinked somberly at the ceiling; he sighed. This was not like his usual awakening. These last three years he had been wont to emerge from sleep refreshed, to hop nimbly from bed, to devour an excellent breakfast, and to hurry off to work. Just now his head, through which divers barbaric strains of dance music still pulsed, was aching. He was not even hungry, and —oh, it was the atmosphere of the confounded place, of course, and the fool talk and the mass of affectation and artificiality and all that!

In cold truth, yesterday his uncle and Mary Allers had been the only real beings on the premises, and now Mary had vanished and his uncle was luxuriating in a temper fit! John sighed again, more moodily, and set about his dressing. He was rather anxious to have a word with his uncle, was he not?

" Uncle's home, Barton?" he queried, when he had finished breakfast.

" Oh, yes, sir. He—he left word that he wasn't to be disturbed before noon, Mr. John."

" That so? Well, it's half past eleven now. In his den?"

" Yes, Mr. John, but I think, sir—that is to say, it might be as well—"

Young Mr. Valmer merely grinned, and stepped briskly toward the stairway. He knocked upon the door of the den. There was no answer. He tried the knob. He entered.

The elder Mr. Valmer, hunched over his desk and writing, turned a black stare upon him.

" Barton tell you I was busy here till noon?" he demanded bluntly.

" He did, but—"

" Then what the devil do you mean by forcing a way in like that?"

Young Mr. Valmer controlled himself admirably, and even smiled.

" Well, I knew you wouldn't mind my dropping in for a minute, uncle."

" Did you? Well?"

" And I won't bother you for more than that. Ina said that you had Miss Allers's address, uncle. Will you give it to me, please? There's—er—something I want to mail her."

It had been a perfectly suave and ordinary little speech, to be sure, yet it produced an astonishing effect. Mr. Valmer's veins swelled, just as they had swelled yesterday. His eyes bulged, too, apparently with a new thought.

" Did you know that—do you know that girl?" he demanded.

" I've talked to her once—yesterday," John smiled. " Why?"

" Because—because—bosh! Get out of here!"

" Very well, sir," John said, although he had ceased his smiling. " If you'll just give me the address?"

" I will not!"

" What?"

" I will not!"

" But have you it?" John persisted.

Mr. Valmer drew a long, wheezing breath.

" I decline to discuss that—young woman!" he puffed.

" But—*why?*"

"Confound you, sir!" thundered old Stephen. "Must I account to *you* for—"

"Not necessarily," his nephew said, with swift and remarkable crispness. "I have no idea of posing as a *Galahad*, or anything of that sort; but there seems to be a mystery about Miss Allers, and an unpleasant one, and I'm quite certain that she has done nothing to deserve the reflection. Just what is wrong?"

"I decline," said Stephen, "to discuss the matter. Is that all you have to say, John?"

His angry eye settled hard upon his nephew. In the old days, that stare would have sent John hurrying from the room, but it failed now. John, in fact, was growing decidedly red and savage on his own account, and his eye was very nearly as filled with emotion as was Stephen's.

"No! It's not all I have to say!" he erupted suddenly. "I've this much more to say—I've been home just about twenty-four hours, and I've had enough. I'm going back to the factory!"

"Huh?" snarled Mr. Valmer.

"Because, down there, people may not use quite the same grammar, and they may not wear quite the same clothes, but they're sound, and they're sane, and they're real. They don't slur and sneer at women when their backs are turned. The—the mature men don't fly off in furies that would do small credit to a five-year-old child. The—the—the—well, things haven't changed here any since I left, and I'm going back!"

"Why, you — you infernal young jackass!" Mr. Valmer sputtered. "Don't you know your own mind one hour at a time? Don't you—"

"You bet I do!" his nephew panted. "Good-by!"

"Come back here, sir!" roared Mr. Valmer. "Or, by gad, sir—*by gad*, sir—"

John, however, was out of hearing, tramping away so energetically that the corridors echoed.

As suddenly as they had begun, these echoes ceased. Barton, one floor below the library, stepped to the foot of the stairs and cocked an inquiring ear aloft, by way of gaining a clew to the recent commotion. He heard only John's voice, evidently speaking to the library telephone:

"Matter of family business, and it wasn't possible to get back. No, I understand that, and I'm sorry. It will not happen again, Mr. Eggers. Well, all right, then, and thank you very much! I'll be back on the job to-morrow morning!"

XIX

As dusk began to settle upon Scarford, Stephen Valmer was calmer. This, indeed, was so apparent that Penning found himself heaving little sighs of relief at one-minute intervals. Contrition of some sort was evidently upon the valued client this early evening.

The cause of it came to light suddenly.

"Boy's gone back to his damned factory again, Penning!"

"John? Is that so?" the attorney cried.

"Yep! Mainly my fault. He came in here and demanded Mary's address, just when I was trying to consider Mary's case dispassionately. I refused it, and he went into a towering rage. A bad thing, this—"

"Mary's address, eh? That's curious!" said Mr. Penning. "Did he know Mary, years ago, at the factory?"

"What? No—we should have heard of it. I took Mary out of the place a day or so after John went into it, so he could hardly have had time to get acquainted there. If he'd known the girl, he'd have known where she lived. For that matter, he informed me that he had talked to her just once, yesterday, so—what was I saying? Oh! A bad thing, this Valmer temper, Penning!"

"H-m!" murmured the lawyer.

"Well? Isn't it?" Stephen demanded irascibly, since he seemed to be having some difficulty in driving home the point.

"Oh, it is and it isn't," Penning hastily replied. "I mean to say, it's regrettable, of course, but — ah — quite natural, Mr. Valmer. It—"

"A bad thing!" the master of the house persisted gloomily. "I'll cure myself sooner or later, Penning. I'll be—yes, Barton?"

"There's a lady to see you, sir," the butler said, and went so far as to smile broadly.

"What?"

"Yes, sir—Miss Allers, Mr. Valmer."

"Well, upon my word!" Stephen shouted gladly. "Where is she?"

"She's right here," a small voice said, from the corridor.

The head of the house bounced from his chair. Past the staring Barton he pushed, and out into the corridor, both his hands extended.

"Why, my dear child!" he cried. "Come in here! Come in!"

He all but dragged Mary after him. He stopped, then, and beamed upon the girl, as Barton closed the door.

"I was right!" proclaimed Mr. Valmer.

"I'm ashamed to ask if I—may come back for a while," Mary essayed.

"My dear, one moment! It's remotely possible that I am wiser than you fancy—that I know most of your doubts and wonderings and so on, Mary. Some old, stray urge grew to a sudden impulse, and sent you back to your old surroundings. You found that you had outgrown them, and that they were impossible. Is that the whole story?"

"It—yes, but—"

"And now you've returned to your proper level, to stay! Mary, my child!"

"Yes?"

"This little adventure of yours is now a closed book. You've never been away, or thought of going away. You'll want to dress for dinner now. What became of Barton?"

"I—think he took my bag to—my room," Mary faltered.

"Barton was always intelligent!" Stephen said, with a great laugh. He patted Mary's shoulder. "You run along after your bag, my dear!"

When the door had closed, Mr. Penning's countenance was rather a study. The attorney had fondly fancied that one disturbing element had eliminated itself from the Valmer scheme of things, and it was clear that he had erred. Stephen, however, was wasting no time on a study of Mr. Penning's expression.

"Well, Penning? Once more, am I vindicated?" he demanded.

"If you mean that you thought she'd return, yes. But—"

"Thought? Bosh! I knew it! Character's character, Penning! One can mold it like wax; but, unlike wax, once it's intelligently molded—what's the matter, Penning. You're not going to cry?"

"I—well, no," the attorney said, smiling rather sadly.

"In your always valued opinion, you think I take all this a little too seriously—is that it?"

"Frankly, yes, it is," replied Penning, very earnestly. "You've always been an original soul, of course, and brimming over with energy, but—"

"I can't help that, and I refuse to apologize for it!" Stephen interrupted.

"There's no reason why you should. When you were in business, that sort of thing was very desirable; but this little notion isn't business, and—"

"Wait a minute, Penning!" commanded Mr. Valmer. Planting his elbows on the table, he fixed the attorney with his eye. "When I was in business, all there was of me—every ounce—went into the business. When I tackle anything else, all there is of me goes into *that!* I'm not so constituted that I can fiddle around the edges of a proposition and touch it with my finger tips. Some people are — you are, for example. When I go into a thing, I plunge in, and I swim the whole route, and I get results; and I'm glad that I wasn't built along any other lines! Your eye, just now, suggests that I am demented, Penning."

"Oh, no—I'd hesitate to say that," the attorney smiled.

"True, but only for diplomatic reasons," said Mr. Valmer. "Well, the man who proposed the first railroad train was a lunatic, I believe. The chap who wanted to talk along a wire wasn't any too reliable mentally, and it's only day before yesterday that the fellow who really thought we could fly through the air was distinctly an eccentric. There is always the vast element—like yourself, Penning, to be sure—created without vision, which must wait until a man has been in his tomb for a century or two before hailing him as a benefactor; but if I'm inaugurating a movement which will in time reclaim from the dregs thousands upon thousands of very splendid women, some day or other your more or less ornamental shade will return to earth and admit — grudgingly, I presume—that I started something!"

"Um—ah—possibly," the attorney said.

"All right! Mary's the nucleus of that movement," Stephen concluded. "Where are my tentative notes on the Valmer Foundation, Penning? In the safe?"

"Yes," said Penning's numbed voice.

"Well, get 'em out! Stir your stumps and get 'em out!" Stephen chuckled, and even rubbed his hands. "I think we can put a little heart into the thing now!"

XX

INA FAYLES, having dressed for dinner, tiptoed to Mrs. Dinsmore's room and stepped in. Her eyes were large, her color was high, and her respiration had quickened. In a vague way, Ina resembled a wild beast newly aware of danger of a highly personal nature.

"You know, don't you?" she hissed into her sister's ear.

"Know what, honey?"

"Mary's *back!*"

Mrs. Dinsmore emerged abruptly from her languor. Mr. Dinsmore sat up, too, and ceased humming his little Spanish song.

"Oh, but I say!" he observed pleasantly. "Are you sure, Ina?"

"Oh, it can't be!" said his wife.

"Well, whether it can or not, she's back!" Mrs. Fayles stated, with rising energy. "Barton carried her beastly little bag past my door—it was open just a crack. I couldn't believe my own eyes, and I watched. Mary followed her bag about two minutes later. She's in there now—dressing, I suppose!"

"I say! Possibly that's why the honored father was shouting so gayly at his tame lawyer a moment back?" hazarded Wells Dinsmore.

"You heard that, too?"

"Oh, decidedly! No trouble at all to fancy him throwing his hat in the air and giving off cheers and—"

Ina's eyes were flashing at her sister.

"Well!" she said, with some difficulty. "I imagine the time has come to march up and face it. What is Mary?"

"She — she's a curse!" Mrs. Dinsmore cried. "She's a horrible—"

"Edith, this isn't just the moment for hysteria," said Mrs. Fayles quietly. "I could have screamed myself when I saw the wretched little creature mincing along the corridor, but that sort of thing's not likely to take us very far. Isn't it high time that we learned the whole truth about Mary?"

"How?"

Perched on the edge of her chair, Mrs. Fayles tapped with her right foot and permitted her expressive nostrils to dilate.

"Well, we're adult and fairly respectable, and not absolutely dependent on dad, if we do live here. We have some rights which even father is bound to respect," said she. "Little oddities we can well afford to overlook. It's dad's house, and if he feels like painting it purple, or standing on his head in the middle of the dining table, that's his privilege, I suppose; but there's nothing little about this. It's a downright scandal! A perfectly strange woman, good-looking, artful, demure, all that—just the type to turn the head of an elderly man!"

"I say, is there any special type?" Mr. Dinsmore asked. "I've often wondered!"

"And unless we mean to remain supine, and submit to whatever outrageous things dad may be planning to inflict on us, the thing is to go to him now and insist that he should explain Mary!"

"May I suggest one thing?" Mr. Dinsmore put in earnestly. "Bit risky to do that. He might oblige, and you wouldn't be any happier. Might be a lot better to let things run on as they are. Whatever the old gentleman's joke may be—"

"It's not a joke!" Edith said, rising. "Shall we go now?"

"I'm ready, if you are!"

"And I'll do the talking!" added Edith.

Thus it happened that about a minute later Stephen Valmer looked up from his rather voluminous notes and smiled at his daughters as he had not smiled in some time. Mrs. Fayles shuddered at that smile!

"May we have about five minutes of your time, father?" Edith asked crisply.

"Fifty of them, if you like. You don't mind Penning?"

"No, I think Mr. Penning had better remain. Father, this is about Mary. She's here again?"

"She is!" beamed Stephen.

"To be here permanently?"

"I think so."

"Well, we don't know just what's gone wrong with you, dad. You're usually rather punctilious about such things; but Ina and I feel that an explanation, at the very least, is due us now, and we've come for it. Who *is* this Mary?"

Her voice rang hard on the question, which was growing quite a familiar one in that household. Mr. Valmer's beaming smile subsided, and he stiffened a little.

"Your manner is rather of the stand-and-deliver order, Edith!"

"I can't help that. It's not meant to be; but you—you seem utterly unable to see that we're concerned in the matter. We have to live in the house with Mary."

"Is that unpleasant?"

"Emphatically so, when one doesn't know a thing about her!" Edith said hotly.

Mr. Valmer's lips closed grimly. Ina stifled a sigh. Edith, however, hurled a hand grenade.

"You're in love with the girl, father—is that it? Be frank!" she said.

"I'm—I'm *what?*" Stephen gasped.

"Well, are you?"

"No! I—I—I am not! I assure you that—why, God bless my soul! Who ever suggested that?"

"You yourself!" clicked from Edith's angry tongue. "You installed her here, without so much as one word of warning. You introduced her to us—and beyond that we know nothing—*nothing!* It's perfectly apparent that you are infatuated with her, and—"

"Edith, stop!" Mr. Valmer choked wildly. "You—why, upon my soul! That's—that's the most preposterous notion a crack-brained girl ever conceived! Penning, you—you—"

The lawyer smiled coldly.

"Don't appeal to me, sir, please," he said. "Conventions are conventions. I've tried to point that out at various times. Some such construction was bound to be put on the matter, sooner or later."

"Well, we'll have an end of that construction immediately, then!" Stephen puffed. He dabbed his forehead with his handkerchief, and stared wildly at his daughters. Then, so great was his good humor this evening, within ten seconds he smiled again. "My dears," said he, "Mary is wholly and solely an excursion into the realm of character development."

Mrs. Dinsmore seemed to grow dizzy.

"That's—lucid!" she said.

"If it isn't, it shall be made so. Mary is, in the fullest sense, a girl of the people—a factory worker, indeed, and—"

"A factory girl!" Ina gasped.

"She was. She is so no longer," said Ina's father. "I selected her. I have had her trained. To my mind, she is an extremely fine young woman of the higher order. She is now fitted for the sphere which she occupies. You understand?"

Edith's fluttering lids suggested an impending faint. Ina, after a long, hard stare at her father, shook her head.

"No, I don't understand!" she managed. "Is it—is it—"

Almost unquestionably, some of Mr. Penning's ancestors had been hanged as traitors. The strain seemed to be in him; or perhaps it was only that Mr. Penning had a way of sensing opportunities. He possessed unwavering faith in the ultimate power of the female in any household. Since this little excitement had started of its own accord, however naturally, bringing it to full flower on the spot might be altogether possible.

There was a sleek, dangerous quality to Mr. Penning's smile as he said, ever so suavely and earnestly:

"It *is* a trifle difficult to grasp at first, Mrs. Fayles. I found it so, I admit; yet the underlying idea is wonderful—wonderful! Mary is an experiment in development—a successful one, we are forced to concede. Mr. Valmer plans to go much farther than Mary, however."

"What does he plan?" Edith choked.

"Why, Mr. Valmer—I betray no confidence, sir—means to extend the idea—means to select other deserving and promising young women—means, I may say, to create eventually dozens of Marys, hundreds of Marys!"

"And have them all around here?" Ina cried excitedly.

"Oh, that's a matter for future consideration, of course," Stephen said, somewhat impatiently.

Mr. Penning beamed artlessly, quite after the Stephen manner.

"Mr. Valmer plans, also, to devote a considerable—a very considerable—portion of his fortune to this admirable movement," he stated distinctly. "It is to be known as the Valmer Foundation."

"And *you're* approving that?" escaped Ina.

"I?" Mr. Penning waved his hands vaguely. "It is your father's money, my dear Mrs. Fayles. If he chooses, as he sometimes suggests, to pledge his last dollar to the betterment of womankind—why, could it go to a nobler purpose?"

After this, Mr. Penning waited. A great hush came upon the room. Seconds passed, and cold disappointment crept over the attorney. He had, apparently, overdone the thing. Ina and Edith, usually candid and rather voluble, were only stunned at this moment.

But Stephen, by all the gods, was smiling approval at him!

"Penning has put it very concisely and intelligently," the rich man stated, rising, to indicate that the little interview was over. "You understand Mary now, my dears? You'll be better able to appreciate her, eh?"

(*To be continued in the December number of* MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE)

The Gulf

HOW LEONARD KIRBY CAME AT LENGTH TO FIND HIMSELF ON THE WRONG SIDE OF IT

By Du Vernet Rabell

ANNA KIRBY could grow morning glories where nothing but tin cans and chickweed had ever bloomed. By some miraculous process, involving ammonia and coffee grounds, she could keep Len's trousers from showing shiny spots. She could check a baby's cold at the first moist sniffle; but despite these and other obvious virtues, many of life's subtler meanings passed her by. In her simple and well ordered life, however, she had never realized this, and she had never done anything about it.

Now, with sickening suddenness, she wished she had. Sitting there in her sunshiny living room, with its plain but comfortable furnishings, its dull-toned, restful rugs and hangings, she felt as if a river on whose banks she and the children had played for years had risen suddenly—had surged up without warning, right there before her eyes, and, eddying and whirling, was sweeping her off her feet, choking, strangling, toward she didn't know what.

"Why, Len!" she managed to gasp, at last. "You mustn't joke about a thing like that!"

But her hands were growing slowly cold. Something told her that Len wasn't joking.

Len himself didn't take the trouble to tell her he was in deadly earnest.

"Times have changed, Anna." He leaned forward, tapping the carefully polished table with his forefinger. His eyes narrowed to slate-colored slits. They were always that way when he was intent. "Twenty-five years ago, when people married, it was taken for granted that because they felt alike, they thought alike. Later, if they found they didn't, if they didn't hit it off, they just dragged along, because of what people would say, because of the children—I don't know, some fool reason or other. Now, if you use your head at all, you know better. You know that the same roof doesn't necessarily mean the same ideas. If two people are unhappy together, why, they're walled in—they don't get anywhere."

Anna grasped at the one thing in all this that she had been able to comprehend.

"But, Len, haven't we always hit it off? We never quarrel—"

"What have we to quarrel about? Nothing ever comes up that's interesting enough to scrap about. There is a gulf between us. Oh, Anna, don't you feel it?"

Anna knotted her hard-working little hands, and shook her head mutely.

Len got to his feet.

"Well, the gulf is there, and it's getting wider. It's going to mean separating sooner or later, a divorce—the way people fix things now. It had much better be sooner, now, while we are both young, while we have ambitions—"

"But I haven't ambitions," Anna wailed out suddenly.

Len stopped his aimless pacing about the room. He looked at his wife, consideringly, dispassionately.

"There, that's it—that's the whole thing! You haven't ambitions. You're satisfied."

A gleam of amazement, of self-defense, of resentment, showed for an instant in Anna's eyes; but almost at once they filled with tears, and the gleam was drowned.

"I know I'm satisfied. Why shouldn't I be? I have everything—you, the children, the house—"

Len took from this just what Len Kirby was bound to take—what he had always taken, from situations, from people, from life itself—the things he could see, could get his hands on.

"The house—*this* house! My God!"

Against talk of gulfs and ambitions Anna Kirby merely struggled as against a rising flood, because instinct told her she must, not knowing exactly what she was struggling against; but here was something she understood, something to fight for.

"Don't talk that way, Leonard Kirby!" Her soft voice, with its many crooning notes, took on a quick ring of authority, as she felt ground under her feet. "Don't talk that way! This is your home, this house, and a man must be proud of his home."

"No, he mustn't — not this kind of a home—not if he is going to get anywhere. I never was satisfied, not from the first. I always wanted something better."

They say that the deepest truth can be comprehended by the simplest mind.

"You can't say one home is better than another," Anna told him. "It may be bigger, may have finer things in it—just as you couldn't say one child is better than another," she hurried on, warming to her theme as something stirred within her—something deep, something fundamental, something that rushed words, like reënforcing guns, to her usually unready tongue. "A child may be healthier, may have more advantages, but it can't be really better than another."

Len wasn't keen on hearing this. He never was keen on hearing anybody's side but his own. This trait had helped him to get on—in a certain direction. He stopped his wife with an upflung gesture.

"I don't get all that, just as you don't get what I say. That's just it—we never do. That's the trouble with us—the gulf—just as I told you. Money is what counts to-day in this country—money to buy things that you don't care a hang about when you come right down to it. You honestly believe such things don't count; but I know they do. Money—have you got it? Can you make it? Have you a good home in the right neighborhood? Does your wife dress well? Do your children go to a private school? Have you an automobile?"

"I'd like the children to go to a private school," Anna put in eagerly. "I'd like an automobile."

Something flashed into Len's eyes — a quick, furtive thing, like the gleam of a fish coming to the surface of a gray pool, and then, frightened at something it has seen, darting back into the depths.

"Yes, but there you'd stop. No, *no*, Anna!" he interposed swiftly. "I want to get along in the world. I want a good business."

"But the business your father left you is good. Wade & Kirby is one of the oldest printing firms in Chicago."

"Old is right. It's too old, too full of old ideas and old employees. I want to change everything. You'd have a fit—I know you would. It comes right down to this—a man and a woman, to make the best out of their lives, have to be pulling for the same thing, heading for the same goal; and we aren't. I'm working my head off for things you don't want, things which, to you, have no value."

"Are you sure they have value?" Anna asked quietly.

Len came close to her and looked at her, squarely, coldly. There was nothing of anger in his eyes, only chill determination, absolute, final, like the last crashing chord of a martial sonata.

"Yes—I'm sure!"

Anna made an involuntary gesture, as if to push from her lips a cup that was too, too bitter.

The clock ticked and ticked, and presently, with a preliminary whir, struck twelve. The noon whistles blew, and almost at once the children from the school down the street were shouting and calling.

"I can't believe all this is happening," Anna faltered at length. "It's like a stroke of lightning, an explosion. That you and I—that you really want to separate—to have a divorce! Why — why, a divorce would mean—oh, I don't know what!"

"It would mean freedom, Anna, for both of us—freedom to accomplish things—"

"What is there for me to accomplish that I haven't already accomplished?" Again she began her little litany. "We have always got along, and you've been happy—at least you never acted as if you were not. Our home has been comfortable, and even pretty." She paused to look around her. "What we have in it is good, real mahogany, real rugs—and I've always hated plated silver. The children—"

She seemed to have put off mentioning these last dear things; and even now, when she had brought herself to it, she couldn't go on.

Len bit his lips. Even Len, with all his ideas cut and dried, with the course he meant to pursue explained perfectly and in a satisfactory fashion to himself—even Len felt uncomfortable, disturbed. This feeling of discomfort angered him, but he forced himself to gentleness.

"The children will be all right, Anna. I'll always look out for them. I'm going to climb—to climb high, and I'll see that they have everything. They're my children—I realize that I'm responsible for them. Why, if you like, I'll take them—"

"No, you won't, Len—you won't take them!" There was a crash, as Anna, the careful housewife, the wielder of the light duster, dropped a bit of fabrile glass she had been fingering. "I'll keep the children. I'll manage to take care of them myself. They—they are all I'm going to have. I won't have fine ambitions to help me along, but—"

Her voice was bitter, but it broke at the end. She went on standing there, her eyes on the iridescent fragments at her feet. Great hot tears welled up under her lids, seemed to swell them unbearably before they escaped, caught for an instant on her lashes, and then rolled down her cheeks. A tiny trickle of blood appeared at the corner of her mouth, where her tooth had bitten into the skin.

With a quick indrawn breath, she stooped, picked up the gleaming bits, looked about her vaguely, as one finding herself in a strange place, and then walked to the door. With her hand on the knob, she stopped, and came swiftly back.

Shaken, tear-stained, ash-white as she was, there was at this moment a prettiness about Anna Kirby, poignant, appealing. It seemed as if nature, standing by, watching, was doing her best for this stricken child of hers, was putting into her hands a last weapon.

"You spoke of—of a gulf between us," Anna began, her voice low, trailing off into the faintest of whispers. "A gulf can be bridged—"

If Len Kirby's heart went out to her misery, her crushed bewilderment, his head checked it; but he managed as gently as he could—if one can be gentle and ruthless at the same time. He took her icy, stiff fingers and tried to warm them as he shook his head.

"No, Anna—the gulf between us can't be bridged."

Anna raised her eyes and looked at her husband—looked long, intently, as if her eyes were etching his face, its every feature, on her heart. Then she freed her hands and turned away from him.

II

About a year and a half later, when Len married Mae Harrington, the girl who had been his private secretary, Anna stopped worrying about the gulf. She saw a light—or, at least, what looked to her like a light. After all Len's talk, she mused bitterly, it was just the old, sordid story — another woman.

Mae Harrington was an efficient young person who was worth as much as any firm could afford to pay her. She was a high-salaried employee, and earned every cent of her weekly check. Her brains were exceptional and her instincts unerring. She had been of inestimable help to Len Kirby in reorganizing his business. She understood his ideas perfectly, and there wasn't a grain of sentiment in her make-up.

"If you'll pardon my saying so, Mr. Kirby," she told him, "you are not a 'rut man.' Even if your father hadn't left you this printing business, you would never have worked for anybody—not for long. You would have struck out for yourself; and a man who has his own business is the man who climbs. He is never satisfied, he is always looking ahead. Everybody is more ambitious for himself than for any one else. That's human nature."

"I do look ahead," Len agreed. "That's why I'm making these changes in the working force here," he added.

Mae Harrington's eyes, with the lightning brain behind them checking up, ran down the list of names on the slip he handed her.

"You're right, Mr. Kirby. Most of these men have been here too long. They live in the past. Nowadays it's not 'What are you turning out?' but 'How much are you making?'"

Len looked out of the window to where the Chicago River, like a long gray snake, wound its slow and turgid way toward Lake Michigan.

"Competition is pretty keen in the printing business these days, and making money—"

Mae Harrington interrupted him, her eyes glinting like freshly minted coins.

"Mr. Kirby, making money is the easiest thing in the world, if you keep your mind on just that one thing. Money must be the main issue. Every plan, every move you make, must be made with cold, hard cash in view. There can't be any side issue. You must be keen and quick. You can't be squeamish, and you can't be soft."

Len Kirby was looking at her with a new appreciation in his eyes. This girl was going to be useful. She was the kind he wanted to work with him. He could be frank with her. They had the same ideas—they both knew that money was what spelled success.

He said something of this to her, and she nodded briskly.

"Money is what counts, because it's the corner stone, the foundation of everything. After you've made money, it's time enough to talk about 'the reputation of the firm' and 'the high standard of our goods.' After you've succeeded, you can take up other lines — endow art galleries, sit on charity boards, and so on. Why, when a man has money"—she paused and laughed, but she glanced at him with a slight flush, as if she feared that she might be going too far—"he can buy himself a royal princess for a wife. I see it's just been done."

She opened the morning paper that lay on the desk.

Len took his eyes — quietly calculating eyes—from her bent head.

"I don't know about the wife. 'He travels the swiftest who travels alone,' they say."

But he married Mae Harrington. There were times when the big library of his club was a desert waste of nothingness. He grew tired of staring at a menu. He was lonely. Of course, it was simple enough to seek a remedy for his loneliness, but those discreet little apartments out of the residential district are never satisfactory—too hazardous, too sure to nauseate after a time. Yes, he concluded, it was better to be married—that is, if you and the woman you married understood each other.

Certainly Mae Harrington understood him, his aims, his ambitions, everything. Why, she even wanted to keep on at the office after they were married, so sure was she that no one could carry out Len's orders with the same exactitude; but Len wouldn't hear of this.

As time went on, and the business grew and grew, its wheels whirring with a new impetus, whirring fast and furiously, crushing or sweeping aside this one and that one who chanced to come in their way, Mae ceased to worry.

"When you make money as fast as you're making it," she told Len, "it's like a snowball. It just goes on rolling and gathering up more and more snow. Nothing can stop it."

Len nodded.

"Yes. You can have those emeralds," he added. "There is going to be a big time at the club on New Year's Eve. You'd better see about buying them to-day, so that you can wear them."

"They make me look a little sallow," Mae said thoughtfully. "I was wondering —still, emeralds cost more than diamonds. They mean money."

III

YES, Len Kirby was certainly getting on; but then it never occurred to him that he wouldn't get on. He had a self-conscious ego, and he had no introspective qualities—both of which facts gave him a cool self-confidence.

Everything about him reflected his prosperity—the black pearl in his scarf, his motor, his home overlooking the lake—and Mae.

And yet, if there was a fly in the amber, it was Mae. She did her best, and it never occurred to her to doubt that she was successful; but while she tried for luxury, a look of wealth, she only succeeded in getting ostentation. She had oriental rugs in every room in the house, even the bathrooms. A resplendent *toreador,* by the great Zuloaga himself, strutted on the wall of her foyer. Her bills at the dressmakers' were of such a size that Len had come to charge them to overhead; but still there were women who merely bowed to her, and other women—a noisy, war-enriched set—who, while they dined at her home and admired her jewels, whispered and laughed behind their hands.

Mae was clever—but hard. Even with a soft-brimmed velvet hat, which softens almost any woman, and with a rich fur collar concealing the square lines of her chin, you felt her hardness. Perhaps it was this, as well as the splendor of her home, her vestments, and her ornaments, that kept Mae from the position that Len had expected his wife to have.

If it was so, however, this same hardness also kept her from caring a rap. She was perfectly contented. If she didn't receive an invitation for this luncheon, that bridge party, she could always fill in the time by going over her jewels with a view to have something reset, or faring forth and buying a new fur coat.

She could understand Len's restlessness. Here in the West his business horizon was limited. He was champing for a wider financial scope; and when, after they had been married four years, he received an offer to consolidate with an Eastern firm, she rejoiced as much as he did.

They left the yellow brick house on Hyde Park Boulevard and went to New York, where they took an apartment on Park Avenue at a rental that made even Len blink. He took no chances on Mae with his investment. He had in an interior decorator to " do " the place.

Mae didn't care. She was too busy seeing New York to want to spend any time in making a home. The theaters, the restaurants, the dressmaking establishments where they served tea and prices were never mentioned, the jewel shops—she was mad about them all. She felt that Len, too, was satisfied—he had the scope he craved and needed.

And Len was satisfied for the first few years. His printing business had become a large publishing house, and Len began to meet people whose names were before the public. A famous general, who was writing a history of the war, dined with Payson, the head of Len's firm, and the Kirbys met him there. The firm decided to publish the life of a man whose name had for generations meant much in the annals of his country—meant much socially, as well as in the world of statecraft; and the Kirbys met his family at a Long Island country club.

But although their relations with their new associates were always pleasant, these associates never became friends.

Len Kirby, now Leonard Bray Kirby, was making a great deal of money at this time. He carried it well—as well as he carried liquor. Wine didn't make him stupid — it made him keen. His money made him keen. It made him think.

It began to be plain to him that money was not, after all, the highest goal he could attain; that there were heights to which he could not climb, even by this golden ladder. At first he couldn't see these heights, and didn't even suspect their existence; but as time went on, the peaks became dimly visible. He had glimpses of them now and again above floating, shifting mists.

And once he had seen the heights, obtained a clear vision, he acted.

He was kinder to Mae than he had been to Anna. At least, he was kinder in a way —if, as I questioned before, ruthlessness can be combined with any of the softer qualities. He explained things to her.

" I'm clever, I'm keen, I'm a good business man; but good Lord, Mae, I don't know anything!"

Mae, stretched on the couch like a golden sacrifice on an Egyptian altar, blew a cigarette ring.

" Tell that to one of the men you've smashed, or tell it to old Payson—and listen to them laugh!"

Leonard Kirby frowned.

" We're not talking about the same thing. Now see here, Mae—you have brains, you can see my point of view if you want to."

" Say on," Mae returned obligingly.

Leonard leaned back against the table, his arms folded. He had learned not to fidget when he talked.

" I can talk with a certain glibness of Galsworthy and Rupert Brooke. I can recognize Tschaikowsky's ' Pathetic Symphony ' when I hear it. I know a water color from an oil; but Keats and Verlaine are merely names to me—as yet. The futurist school and the impressionists are just something over which newspapers have controversies; and to-day I learned for the first time that Beethoven was deaf."

Mae stared at him.

" Well, for the Lord's sake, what of it?"

His face became expressionless as a python's. The head of a couple of firms in Chicago knew this expression. It meant that Leonard Kirby had pressed the button that set the wheels in motion—those wheels that whirled with an ever increasing speed until everything in their path lay flat.

" Mae," he said slowly, distinctly, " there is a gulf between us—and you are too clever not to see it."

" Well, it's not of my making!" Mae kicked her golden slippers free of her clinging draperies, and sprang to her feet. " It's you—you've changed. Your sense of values has changed. When we used to talk things over, to plan together, there wasn't any gulf!"

" When we used to plan to make more money, more and more," Len put in.

" Yes," Mae agreed eagerly; " and you made it, too!"

"Granted; but I've discovered that money doesn't get you anywhere. Making money, and hanging on to it after you've made it, takes so much of your energy that you haven't time for anything else."

"What else is there?" Mae asked in honest bewilderment.

For an instant Leonard hesitated.

"Well, I don't just exactly know; but I've missed something. I'm going to find out what it is, and go after it. I want to *know* something, *do* something besides piling up money!"

"Well, don't we do things? Good gracious, we're on the jump all the time! Don't we go to the opera all the time, and subscribe to those dances at the Golden Pheasant, and don't we go to Palm Beach and French Lick—"

"Oh, stop!" Leonard turned wearily on his heels. "Despite your brains, you don't get me. I expected that at least you'd see my point of view, even if you didn't understand it; and I didn't expect that — not with the gulf there is between us!"

He finished what he had to say to her in one sentence. Mae, hard, poised though she was, took an involuntary step backward, and the rouge on her cheeks stood out starkly.

"A divorce? Well, I won't do it! No, I *won't!*"

"Oh, yes, Mae! Now sit down, and listen to me."

She started to speak quickly, to flare out at him, but she checked herself. She was a little afraid of Len—which meant, with a woman of her type, that she realized that he knew her better than she knew him. She drew a deep, unsteady breath, and tried to smile. She touched his sleeve.

"Len, boy, we've been happy. I've been so proud of your success, and"—she hurried on breathlessly—"if other things than money go with success, although I honestly don't see what more anybody could want, I'll go after them, too. I'm no fool. I can learn anything—"

Leonard moved his arm.

"No, you can't—not if you don't see the use of what you are learning. There would always be between us the gulf there is now; and nothing — *nothing* can ever bridge it!"

She stepped aside, so that the lamp on the table shone full on his face. One swift, appraising glance, and she had seen enough.

"All right!" she said.

Leonard smiled.

"You can rest assured, Mae, I'll do the right thing as far as settlements go."

Mae's eyelids flicked.

"Yes—you'll do that, Len." Then her voice became an edged blade, blood hungry. "Leonard Kirby, you think you're getting away with this—this and the other thing you did; but don't fool yourself. In business you have to crush competition if you are going to succeed—I know that; but you can't trample people, humans, just slough them off, and not pay for it! You'll pay, all right, though the check may not be made out to me, or to Anna. Somebody will reach you—somebody harder, colder, more ruthless than even you are." She flung up her hands, her fingers clenched. "And I pray, I *pray* for the day to come!"

IV

Doris Hadley was like the low minor note of a bird in the forest after the crash of a summer storm. She was fair, but there was a sunset warmth about her. She had warm hair, warm eyes. She warmed Leonard Kirby, and drew something up from the depths of him, as the sun draws water from the willing earth.

He met her against the background of a white, sloping-roofed New England house, in a garden fragrant with the breath of honeysuckle and brier rose. The firm was publishing her father's latest book, and Leonard had run up to the little New Hampshire town to discuss some details of the contract.

Leonard Kirby was a living proof that erudition can be put in from the top, superimposed on the brain, so to speak, as the old-time cabinetmakers inlaid their chests and highboys with such tricky skill that to this day no one can tell just where the marquetry ends and the foundation wood begins.

And so with Leonard Kirby. He had wanted to learn, he had a hunger for knowledge, and this very hunger created a vacuum that thrifty nature proceeded to fill. He took on a very convincing mental polish.

After his divorce, he had traveled abroad for two years. There was business for the firm to attend to in France and England; and while he didn't say it in so many words, he let it be inferred that his domestic difficulties had shaken him, had made a change imperative.

By lucky chance he had met a young college professor whose failing eyesight forbade the close work of the classroom, and the two had struck up a mutually beneficial friendship. They traveled through Europe together, browsing in the art galleries of Amsterdam and Dresden. Wallace Overton talked and Leonard Kirby listened. They attended the opera in Milan, and books on the history of music and the lives of the great composers found a place in Leonard's baggage. He also read other books—essays, poetry, Schopenhauer, Racine, Dante.

Moreover, this acquired culture was not all surface. Leonard Kirby possessed an excellent sense of values. He knew the worth of what he was getting, and made it as truly his own as his fortune.

The years passed—increasingly prosperous, enjoyable years. It seemed as if Leonard, acquisitive as he was, could get nothing more from life. Successful, received by the aristocracy of brains in his own country and abroad, his home a treasure house graced by the riches of all the arts, with enough work and sufficient leisure—what else was needed to round out his life?

Nothing, he himself would have said—until he met Doris Hadley.

The first touch of her hand, and he made an amazing discovery. He found that he was emotional. He had faced the hard, practical things of life so early, and so continuously ever since, that this side of his nature had never been developed. Now, coming suddenly upon this rich lode, he was thrilled and enkindled.

The Hadleys came to New York for the winter, and Doris was awed and fluttered by Leonard Kirby's obvious interest in her. She listened to everything he said to her with wide eyes and breathless attention. The way he entertained her—perfectly arranged dinners, the opera, motor rides in his luxurious car—gave her the unfeigned delight of a child.

Her companionship intoxicated Leonard. As the days went on, an aching, wearing hunger for her grew in him, until he wanted Doris Hadley as he had never before in his life wanted anything. It was not merely a desire for her youth and her beauty, but a craving for the essence of the girl herself, as for a rare perfume—no, not that, but a life-giving ether.

Doris was probably in love with him—or, at least, in love with the idea of being loved by the notable Leonard Kirby. One day she found herself engaged to him, with a great white diamond, square-cut, winking up at her from the third finger of her left hand.

" Do you love me?" Leonard demanded hungrily.

" Of course," she replied sweetly.

" But say it, Doris—I want to hear you say it!"

The voice, the eyes of a boy of twenty, could have held no more ardor; but, after all, there is much in common between the love of twenty and the love of fifty. The young man is experiencing its grip for the first time, the older one for what is likely to be the last; and each passionately feels its potence, its worth.

Leonard and Doris were married. After the wedding, when he had her in his arms, her warm, willing lips on his, Kirby knew that this was his moment of perihelion—that he would never be nearer the sun.

That first winter was brilliantly gay. Every one was curious to see the girl who had measured up to Leonard Kirby's requirements for a wife, and Doris moved in a world of glitter, out-of-season food, and dance music. Then they went to Rome for Easter, and came home by way of Paris and London. Doris met many people of note, and was daily impressed by the position she occupied as Leonard Kirby's wife.

He piled the riches of the world at her feet. There was nothing he stopped at to give her pleasure, and no gift so costly that he did not delight to place it in her cool, slender hands.

It was June when they returned to New York, with the question of a home for the summer to be decided at once. They settled on the Ashburton place in Westchester, a great pile of white marble, fit for the founding of a line of kings.

When they had spent an afternoon going over the place, and had finally seated themselves for tea in the white *patio,* Leonard leaned forward and took Doris's hands in his.

" Do you like it?" he asked her.

Her warm, dark eyes wandered about the courtyard with its fountain of dancing nymphs, its tropical plants, and then out between the pillars, where at the edge of the horizon was the glint of Long Island Sound.

" Oh, yes!" she said. " I never dreamed of living in such a palace!"

Leonard crushed her fingers to his lips. "No place could be too beautiful for you, or even a sufficiently lovely setting for your loveliness. But listen, dearest—I have a plan. Of course, I want you always to have this. I love to show you off against such a background; but do you know what I am going to do?"

She shook her head, with its bright waves, so beautifully cared for.

"No, I don't know—only that it will be wonderful. Everything you do is wonderful, Leonard!"

"This isn't going to be wonderful—that is, nothing big or grand; but it is going to be—just heaven!"

Doris turned a great pigeon's-blood ruby around and around her white finger, and waited serenely.

"I'm going to buy a little house I saw once, just over the border in Connecticut," Leonard continued eagerly. "It's a dovecot nestled on the bosom of a soft green hill. It's a little house, very simple, but it's just—well, as I said, it's just heaven!" He paused, his eyes growing tender as he looked at her. "You know, dear, I see things so differently now, since I have you. I have learned the true worth of things. Money doesn't count for much, nor even knowledge—only love and happiness. In a place like that little house, we will find true happiness. I want to run away with you, now and then, to refresh my soul, to give it new life."

She rose, shaking out her heavily embroidered frock. The light from the west touched the gold of her hair, as if to gain a new warmth, a new brilliance, for its own setting. The breeze brushed with kissing lips the faint pink of her cheeks. She looked down at him, smiling.

"I think that's very nice," she said.

So Leonard bought the little house, and from time to time, during the summer, he and Doris spent a few days beneath its roof. He always hated to leave, but there were imperative duties calling them back—guests to receive, visits to make. The big house in Westchester held many interesting people that summer. John Hadley wrote his greatest book there. He and his young secretary, Paul Kimble, occupied a suite in the north wing for three months.

The garden of the little Connecticut house was golden with asters and flaming with salvia, in October, when Leonard and Doris came to walk along its paths for the last time that year, and to have tea in the low-ceilinged living room. They had planned to sail for Europe in November.

It was in the garden that Doris told him. There were no dramatics. She was still like the soft minor melody of a bird.

It was young Paul Kimble, her father's secretary. She loved him.

"I don't know how it came about," she said. "Perhaps, if I had known, I could have done something to stop it; but no, I would not have wanted to. It is too sweet, too precious, love like mine!" She stopped, and then went on with her naïve confession. "It came to me all at once—not, you know, that I might be in love, or that I was going to be, but that I *was*—oh, Leonard, I am!"

Every drop of blood in Leonard Kirby's heart was welling up in his throat, a bitter, salt flood, congealing there; but he managed, by an agonizing effort, to articulate, even to keep his voice steady.

"But, dear, I don't think you really love Paul. It's—it's just a passing fancy. He is a nice young chap, and you've seen a good bit of him."

He stopped, unable to force from his lips another word.

"It isn't a fancy," Doris said. "I love him!"

"Well, granting that"—Leonard fought again for his voice—"granting that, don't you think you'll get over it? We're sailing for Europe—"

She interrupted him, wide-eyed, as one checking sacrilege.

"I have always believed in God, and this is like that part of me—the spirit part of me, the pure flame."

His finger lifted her chin.

"But, dear, have you not read this?—'Men have died, and worms have eaten them—but not for love!'"

She considered this—not as if it meant anything definite to her personally, but as if she was seeking for just the right words with which to refute so patently absurd a statement.

"That's wrong," she declared at length. "Perhaps a girl wouldn't die—not really die—not her body; but something would die, something warm, vital—her light, her soul. And surely"—her dark eyes grew sick—"surely, Leonard, that is the true death!"

He changed his tactics, as a man discards a broken blade.

"Oh, Doris, don't be foolish! Don't ruin your life! Who is this Paul Kimble? What can he give you?"

"Give me?" she repeated vaguely. "Why, I hadn't thought of his giving me anything. *I* want to give—give to him. I want to give him tender care, happiness, love—myself, all of me!"

Leonard hid his eyes from the light in hers.

She was kind; but she was youth, she loved, and so she was ruthless.

"You don't understand," she told Leonard finally. "I am young, and you—there is a gulf between us."

"Doris!" he cried. Fury, terror, cold despair, like a flock of vultures seeking a dead thing, were sinking their talons into his heart. He saw how much this girl could give to the man she loved—and saw it slipping away from him. "Wait!" he said, throwing out his hands.

"No!" She shook her head, sweet, gentle, immovable. "I want to go — right away—to-day. I'm going now!"

Somehow, even in his agony, Leonard Kirby's mind continued to function. He marveled at this. He wondered, with a kind of dull amaze, that he was able to think, to see at once, and so clearly, how futile were argument, reason, command.

Doris touched his sleeve. So might a rose petal drop a last caress on the bare stem before fluttering away into the world. Then she turned and walked down the path.

A wind was coming up, wailing.

Leonard Kirby lifted his twitching face. What was it—that familiar note? Ah, that drumming, that note of doom, deepening, swelling to a reverberating crescendo! Ah, yes — Tschaikowsky's "Pathetic Symphony," which he had had so much difficulty in learning, and which he had never comprehended until now.

The clarion call of the world, love left behind, pleasure, struggle, triumphant banners, and now—nothing but death, grinning at him with merciless lips drawn back. Death—the death of the soul, which Doris had said was the true death.

Doris, through whose young eyes he had sought to glimpse the stars, had felt a gulf between them—a gulf that grew wider.

He started to run along the path, stumbling among the sodden leaves. He could not lose her, he could not—he would bridge the gulf!

Then, on his knees, groveling in the wetness, he stopped.

No, he couldn't bridge the gulf—he couldn't cross it. Time had blasted this gulf deep; and the years, when they go, do not leave behind them the wherewithal for a bridge.

THE LAKE

After a stiff ascent,
  Through underbrush all thorny
With brambles; when the breath is spent
  And hands, except the horny,
Are sore with scratches; when one's feet,
Having slipped much on pebbles, stubbed on rock,
Both burn and ache,
How wonderfully sweet,
How healing, the first shock
Of plunging in the cool waters of the lake!

After a red-hot day,
  Searching for air on porches,
Or in the woods as close as they—
  The goldenrod like torches
To eyes sun-gilded till they smart—
How restful is the gliding of a boat,
Soothing to make
At last some shaded part
Where birches dream, to float
Quietly on the cool waters of the lake!

Richard Butler Glaenzer

The House at the Crossroads

A STORY OF FAMILY PRIDE AND RELENTLESS JUSTICE

By Florence M. Pettee

THERE are those who hold that houses are creatures of habit, environment, and association—like people. The house at the crossroads bore an ominous reputation, and rightly, for it had begun its sinister career in blood and flames. The slinking years had only augmented its dour, shadow-draped interior with occurrences grim, tragic, and criminal. It glutted itself like some Gargantuan monster on the poison of evil. Seemingly the very pores of the dark wood oozed the sweat of sinister and warped motives.

It was an ancient house, stark, bleak, and alone, like a wanton eschewed and shunned by her fellows. The paint scaled like some incurable scurvy from the drab clapboards. The last owner had plucked all the blinds from the windows, giving the uncovered glass the appearance of leering, glazed eyes, shorn of lashes and eyebrows.

A riot of ill kept weeds wrangled among themselves for supremacy, choking up the gravel walks leading to the two doors. Melancholy evergreens surrounded the house at haphazard intervals, appearing for all the world like sable plumes on a hearse. They were a fitting symbol, for more than one funeral cortège had been the result of tragedies born within the four drab walls of the house. Men spoke of the place as "*that* house at the crossroads," much as Main Street gossips whisper, behind holier-than-thou hands, of "*that* woman."

In the first year of its birth, the house had showed signs of abnormality. Jake Ingalls, the notorious murderer, had sought a haven there. This was before the original owners had taken possession. A hard-riding posse had corralled Ingalls in the cellar, after one of their number had been shot to death by the criminal. They smoked the assassin out, and Ingalls was buried at the crossroads in a bed of quicklime, not fifty feet from the house.

Some would-be wag declared that the house had been christened in blood. Its subsequent history seemed to carry out in somber truth the prophetic badinage of the early wit.

As the years rolled by, it seemed to acquire fixed habits of evil-doing, like a hardened criminal steeped in ruthlessness and license. Families came and families departed from the house at the crossroads. Its valuation, punctured by its evil reputation, declined with each leave-taking. Not a family escaped the doom lurking there. Violence was the heritage it bestowed on any who sought mistaken sanctuary within its walls.

Even the wiseacres, who had originally scoffed at the evil whispers, held their tongues and looked aghast. Mere coincidence could hardly be blamed for the crimson chain of tragedies linked to the house. Could the spirit of evil pervade a place, even as it warps and twists some mistaken hearts? Psychologists claim that environment plays a vital part in man's destiny. If evil associations corrupt good manners, could not an atmosphere of evil have the same insidious result? So they pondered.

II

JONATHAN NEWMAN, long, lank, and shrewed-eyed, bought the house for the proverbial song. He had a penchant for deserted and abandoned things—particularly houses. He had made his pile in soap—laundry soap.

He had been born in a house of the same stolid external lineaments as those showed by the house at the crossroads. The Newman birthplace had been sacrificed on the altar of progress. A huge apartment had long since razed its ghostly original outlines to oblivion; but within Jonathan Newman's simple heart was an unfading photograph of the house of his fathers.

He had sought long for one that closely resembled it. His great-great-grandfather had been of an original cast of mind, generous in his bestowal of gables and wings and dormer windows and what-nots. The house at the crossroads, oddly enough, despite its outward senile debility, resembled the Newman homestead as a blood kin might have done. So, deaf to all gossip concerning the place, Newman bought it, exulting like a schoolboy over his prize.

There was nothing fearful or abnormal in Jonathan Newman's make-up. A more robust, matter-of-fact specimen would be hard to uproot from any homespun background. He was literally a plain man of the people, without frills or fancies. His money hadn't spoiled him. His code of honor hadn't been blunted with the practice of keen, wide-awake business acumen.

With Jonathan Newman came his nephew, who had lived with him since boyhood. Douglas Newman was the product of private tutors and an expensive education. Jonathan had been a self-made man with a minimum of the three R's; so he counterbalanced his own lack of schooling with the ambitious education spread over his nephew.

At twenty-four, Douglas had been a dabbler in half a dozen different vocations. Each had seemed to be a false start; and when he came to the house at the crossroads, he had no driving interest except an occasional visit to the soap factory, followed by a speedy forgetfulness of the place.

Douglas had been a problem to plain, hard-working Jonathan Newman. The boy wasn't a Newman. He resembled, externally and internally, his butterfly mother, who had made a fool of Carstairs Newman, the boy's father, and who went her philandering ways until double pneumonia cut her down at thirty-five. " An act of Providence," the neighbors had said; but gregarious gossips are usually devastating in their condemnation of butterflies.

Jonathan Newman had always been as proud as Lucifer concerning his name. He had come from good stock. No Newman had ever forgotten his all-wool surname and its significance; but for many months previous to his investment in the house at the crossroads, Jonathan had been a prey to growing misgivings.

He was a judge of men, and he knew that his nephew did not run true to form, that he was part shoddy. The boy was the last of the name. Newman had guided and guarded him as his own father would have done; but there was a shale streak in him that couldn't be blasted out either by severe methods or by subdued ones. Applying the bit and the spur only strengthened that unfortunate something in Douglas's character.

Newman had purchased the house at the crossroads as a possible cure for his nephew's vacillating character. The boy's father had been a landscape gardener, passionately fond of outdoors and growing things. There was ample space for greenhouses and outdoor horticulture. Mayhap some dormant spark of energy in Douglas could be fanned into a permanent flame. Jonathan was a firm believer in sweet sun and fresh air as a destroyer of sapping character bacilli.

He brought a corps of workmen to renovate the place and its surroundings. He consulted his nephew frequently, even trumping up a pressing business engagement in a distant city that he might saddle the responsibility for the outdoor improvements on the young man.

When he came back, after a month's absence, he found Douglas indifferent and more or less sullen at his enforced stay in the strange house with only old Mary, the cook and caretaker, and the gang of workmen pottering about.

" Uncle Jonathan," the young man began, when he had thawed out sufficiently from his morose stolidity, " how about that high-power roadster you've been hinting at? It's a dog's life here—deader than a toad's funeral. As soon as I get my health in running order, I may consider a job at the factory again. *May*, you understand."

Jonathan Newman considered carefully. There had been other " mays " and " probables " in previous conversations. The poor health alibi, too, had been worn to a frazzle. It was the threadbare excuse of an idler.

" Very well," answered his uncle. " We'll take the early morning express. I'll help you select a good speed wagon."

Douglas frowned.

" I wasn't aware that I needed either a guardian or an assistant," he muttered sullenly. " Got my own ideas about cars."

Newman's eyes narrowed.

" And I've got my ideas about the price," he returned evenly. " Incidentally, I have ideas about real performance and durability, rather than classy stream lines and tinseled accessories."

Douglas shrugged ungraciously.

"There's always a brake on everything I plan!" he grumbled, his dark eyes showing little red spots, his weak mouth assuming a thin line.

"You've heard the conditions," answered Jonathan Newman. "Do you accept?"

Douglas shrugged.

"I'll let you know in the morning," he retorted.

Abruptly he left the room.

III

As Newman entered the living room thoughtfully, a telegram lay on the desk. He picked it up. Breaking the seal, his eyes fell on these lines:

> Arriving on the midday express—important to consult you. JAMES DONALD.

James Donald was his factory superintendent, keen, shrewd, honest, ungiven to heroics or big gestures. Only something of importance could bring him away from the works; for Donald doted on his work, on system and order. He had been at the factory for ten years.

Jonathan Newman opened the door slowly in answer to the superintendent's precise jabbing of the button. As he flung wide the wooden barrier, it seemed phenomenally heavy to him. It was as if some impending, prescient thing pushed it with giant, unseen fingers.

Newman shrugged his shoulders for a fool. He would oil those hinges at the first opportunity. Of course, they were rusty, and therefore they stuck.

"Come in, Donald," he invited in his deep, heavy voice.

With great deliberation James Donald deposited his hat and stick, and followed his employer into the bright living room. Jonathan Newman motioned to a chair as he seated himself, his long legs dangling out awkwardly in front of him.

Donald didn't beat about the bush. He was a brusque business man, ungiven to sentimental subterfuge or polite diplomacy.

"Your nephew," he stated, "is a forger to the tune of twenty thousand dollars. He got the money on bogus checks signed with the firm's name. I have the evidence here. I've had a handwriting expert and a private detective on the case."

Newman never blinked. His great palms tightened on his kneecaps, and his big, humorous mouth narrowed a fraction of an inch. His gray eyes darkened like shadows brooding over clear waters, and the Adam's apple in his throat bobbed spasmodically. Then he became exceedingly still.

"Let me go over the proofs," he said at length.

Donald produced them.

With great slowness and deliberation Jonathan Newman studied them. The evidence was complete. There wasn't a scintilla of doubt. Donald wasn't the man to go off at half cock, to conjure up bogies that weren't.

"Much obliged to you," murmured Newman, his eyes still on the damning documents. "Won't you stay over and go down on the early morning express?"

"Thanks, no," rejoined Donald. "Going right back. Sorry to bring bad news. Couldn't trust it to paper. Rather tell you privately."

"Much obliged," reiterated that oddly quiet voice.

After Donald's departure, Jonathan Newman called his nephew into the living room.

"Douglas," he began, "you're a forger and a criminal. I hold the proof here, and it's useless for you to protest. I am a just man and a stern one. I believe that a person who deliberately breaks laws must sooner or later be compelled to respect them; but I am proud—foolishly and perhaps unrighteously proud—of the name of Newman."

He hesitated. Douglas studied him from under his narrow lids. The young man was shrewd enough to say nothing. He knew of his uncle's family weakness. Indeed, he had gambled on it.

"I'll attend to this matter myself," resumed Jonathan Newman finally, "since it concerns no one but me, besmirches no name but mine; but I warn you now that it is dangerous to play with fire. Sooner or later you will get burned."

Still Douglas Newman said nothing. He had plunged in an unlucky deal with the money, and had lost. He considered that fate had handed him a rotten jolt. Old Jonathan was rich, and could stand the loss; and he had been devilishly tight on the purse strings. Served him right, the old Midas!

"That's all," came Newman's voice heavily.

When Douglas left, Jonathan sat quietly at his desk. The air seemed oppressive and sullen. Evil seemed to hover close. Of course, it was the unpleasant affair that had just come to light in the room.

He went to the windows and flung them all wide, sniffing in the fresh air hungrily. He did not know that not three feet from his desk two men had perished violently, and that other tragic affairs had been consummated within the room.

IV

THREE months later, Jonathan Newman was aroused from a troubled sleep by a slight sound in the living room beneath. There was something in the quality of the noise that pricked him into instant action. It wasn't the wind, nor the almost human creaking of an ancient house. It was the sound of cautious footsteps.

The old man flung on a bathrobe and crept out of the room and down the dark staircase. It was a sultry August night, when the air seemed dense enough to carve. There was a presaging breathlessness pressing down on him from all sides. He knew that some one worked ill there behind the half shut door. He heard an enlightening click from his desk.

The sound was indicative. He had hurriedly deposited a bundle of bank notes there the night before. Some one coveted the legal tender illegally.

Using the heavy door as a bulwark, he put a quick thumb on the electric switch. Light surged through the darkness like an amber river. It snuffed out the screening cañon of night. It came with the startling suddenness of a snarling rifle shot.

Before the desk, with the bank notes in his hand, stood Douglas Newman, blinking like a rat caught in an unseen trap. On the desk lay a long, thin-bladed knife, obviously his burglarious assistant in opening the too accessible desk drawer.

All these things Jonathan Newman perceived in the space of seconds. With a set, stern face he entered the room. He was pale to the lips with a white-hot anger. His eyes were as cold as the glitter of ice.

With the desperation of a cornered hyena, Douglas saw and sensed the belated judgment at last fanned to full flame in his uncle's eyes. He knew that he had played with fire once too often. He apprehended the grim justice staring out at him from his uncle's face. He knew his peril.

He must act quickly, must think like a weasel, or his own uncle would prefer a criminal charge against him and have him clapped in jail as a common thief. Unless —unless—

V

HALF an hour later old Dr. Prentagast pricked up his hair-tufted ears as the fire horse used to jerk into attention at the summoning clang of the station gong. In a trice the old doctor yanked down the receiver and spoke into it with customary precision.

"Yep!" he answered. "Prentagast talking!"

His seamed face was alert and attentive, his big shoulders were thrown back. A call to the bed of a sick person was like quickening ozone to him. There had been altogether too many lulls on his line of late. The young college M. D., with all his newfangled paraphernalia, had dazzled the eyes of the villagers. The call of the bell was long awaited music to the veteran.

A voice came over the wire—a voice odd, metallic, hoarse. Even the attenuated line of copper vibrated under its nervous strain. Dr. Prentagast didn't recognize the husky tone, but he sensed its driving desperation. Moreover, the message was peculiar.

"Tell no one where you go. I want your word of honor in advance that you will never disclose what you see. Come at once to the house at the crossroads. Hurry!"

That was all—a mysterious, terrorized voice calling for help in the darkness, simultaneously commanding absolute secrecy and inviolate silence.

The old doctor clamped his well brushed derby upon his bald head, changed his nearsighted glasses for his farsighted specs, picked up a battered black bag, and went out to the mud-spattered flivver parked disconsolately outside. He rumbled away at a merry pace, two fenders jangling, and one plug making an occasional hiccup. The doctor was no mechanic, even though he was a master at human repairs.

The next morning, Mary, Jonathan Newman's cook and caretaker, left on an extended vacation. Mrs. Prentagast, a kind-faced, tight-lipped woman, assumed many mysterious duties in the isolated house. In addition, she ordered the groceries and attended to the laundry. The doctor called twice daily.

Sol Jennings, chief constable, buttonholed him soon after he had ceased to call at the crossroads.

"Say, doc!" he began, without camouflaged preamble. "Who's been sick in that house down at the crossroads?"

The doctor merely stared at him and through him, and passed on.

"Well, I'll be gol-durned!" flung back Sol. "Cut me deader than a door jamb!"

He straightway went to air his grievance with the station master; but before he could put a word in edgewise, as he said afterward, the railroad official, bursting with importance, informed him in a mock stage whisper:

"Say, Sol, what do you think? Young Newman beat it bag and baggage late last night. He looked blacker than a thunder cloud. Never piped a word, but just faded out of the landscape."

"Huh!" ejected Sol. "Pretty goings on! Mark my words, something will come of it. 'Tain't right or natural. You mark my words, something's going to happen—got to. Anything kept dark like that jest festers and festers like a bile. By and by we'll come to the core!"

VI

A MONTH after old Dr. Prentagast had been summoned to the house at the crossroads, the station master observed a tall, lank figure, with flapping clothes and a black muffler wound high about his neck, pacing weakly up and down the platform, keeping a vigilant eye for the midnight express. Sensing something familiar in the awkward, angular movements of the lank figure, the station master went out.

What was his amazement to recognize in the dead-white face and the sunken eyes the form of Jonathan Newman, a ghost of his former self! The old man's long hands looked white and transparent. He tottered like a man stricken internally as well as externally. Despite the lethargic mildness of the early fall evening, he wound his black muffler even more closely around his throat. When the train thundered in, he seemed bitten with a frenzy to be away.

On the following day the villagers were astonished to see all the windows boarded up in the house at the crossroads. Its extraordinary stillness was impressive. Again it had been abandoned to become the prey of idleness, emptiness, and rank weeds, as well as baleful memories.

The wiseacres wagged their heads. It was running true to form, that house at the crossroads! Hadn't it been baptized in blood? Hadn't it continued its sanguine ablution?

VII

To a distant farmhouse, some hundred miles away, a taxicab carried Jonathan Newman. The homestead was one of those modernized, many-winged affairs where all-the-year-round boarders were a staple and necessary product.

The advent of a thin, white-faced, silent man, seemingly in the throes of consumption, if his muffled throat were any indication, caused little curiosity among the boarders. Jonathan Newman troubled them not at all. He had his meals served in his rooms. He took long walks by himself. He showed an almost feverish interest in the metropolitan dailies. Several of them came to him every evening, and he read late, if the light in his room was any indication.

One day what he feared found him out. It stared up at him from a newspaper——the face of a man wanted for murder. The engraving showed the lineaments of his nephew; but the name beneath it was false.

The facts surrounding the crime that Douglas had committed made Jonathan Newman's blood run cold with horror and shame. He had knifed a pal in some quarrel about money. He had left the man for dead. Just enough life remained in his victim for the dying man to gasp out the facts before he expired.

The murderer had escaped. They had broadcasted his description, even though it was tagged with the alias he had given. They were hunting him down as protectors of society would hound down a poisonous snake escaped from some passing show.

Jonathan Newman bowed his head on his hand. His shoulders shook in the extremity of the emotion that touched him.

For an hour he remained bowed over the sordid, accusing words, over that wanted, hunted face of a Newman. In retrospect he reviewed the years. He realized that pride can become, not a virtue, but a vice; not a stimulus to proud deeds, but a lodestone to weakness and cunning. Douglas Newman was wanted for murder!

All the hateful scenes which had reached their culmination in the house at the crossroads surged over old Jonathan like an inexorable tidal wave. They had reached their culminating point there. He had been deaf to the ugly rumors clinging to the house. He had scoffed at the idea that no one escaped the poison of evil which it breathed on those who came within its embrace; but his own household had been corrupted by its blasting, corroding influence. No wonder people shunned it as they would an unseen plague. It had become a scourge—a menace to society.

On the following evening, Jonathan Newman left the farmhouse. In the dusk he dropped off at a station three miles below his destination. Afoot he strode along in the darkness to the house at the crossroads. A sudden, flashing idea had seized and dominated him. He was in a fever to carry it out. He carried a suit case in each hand. From one came an occasional gurgling sound like some hungry monster licking with an avid, eager tongue. He heard the sound and felt content. It guaranteed the success of his plan.

It was easy to make a surreptitious entrance from the rear. The shrubs and the shadows hovered thick there. In his pocket he carried the keys. It was his house, even though he was entering it like a thief in the night.

Near the back door, he stumbled on the coiled root of a tree, which clung to his ankles like a pernicious reptile. It was symbolic of his pride, he thought, which had clung to him leechlike until his vision had become crossed.

Noiselessly Jonathan Newman entered the somber, silent house. The boards creaked in a minor, lugubrious key, like the wail of lost souls. Enough lives had been forfeited there to protest so long as there was brick or timber remaining.

He deposited his suit cases on the kitchen table. In one there was a can of gasoline; in the other, a capacity load of excelsior. Systematically he laid the long, yellow, snaking lines of the flame-teasers, networking the lower part of the house thoroughly. Very well did he know that a good start would insure a thorough finish. The building was as dry as bleached bones.

He pried off half of the blinding boards on two windows downstairs, and one upstairs, to guarantee a strong draft racing through the house. He took the can of gasoline and saturated the excelsior, throwing what was left upon the thirsty walls. Then he touched off the waiting excelsior.

Merry tongues leaped and licked at the walls with anxious swiftness. He flung light pieces of furniture upon the rising bonfire. Not until the flames and fumes became stifling did he plunge out of that caldron of avenging, cremating fire.

Jonathan Newman had planned his work well. Through the cracks of those windows still boarded, he watched from a safe distance the filaments of fire turn from yellow to coral, from coral to carmine, from carmine to blood-red.

A subdued mutter like a hundred low, exulting voices came from the leaping furnace within. Louder and louder arose the crackling tongues. Brighter and brighter the bloody lines of red streaked through the boarded windows. The entire lower part of the house was a holocaust of fire. The red glare began to creep from the upper windows. The second floor was already ablaze.

It was with a feeling of great relief that Jonathan Newman watched his handiwork. The house at the crossroads had begun its sinister career in flames. It was fitting that it should expire in an obliterating pyre.

With his eyes glued to the barometric flood of crimson in the second-floor windows, he waited and watched. Once he thought he heard an automobile speeding toward the center of the village at an ungodly pace; but in the heat of a more consuming thought the incident faded from his mind.

Suddenly he stood with every nerve taut within him. A hand like ice seemed to touch his spine. His throat contracted, and his tongue became as dry as the excelsior with which he had coaxed the flames. Was he beholding the reincarnated spirit of some hapless victim who had come to a violent end within those noisome walls?

What was it that he imagined he saw? Surely his fancies weren't running away with him!

Angrily he rubbed the smart from his eyes, and looked again. No, the thing was not a bogy of overwrought nerves. He saw it more plainly now—a livid, white face limned out by the glare of the devastating flames. Now it was in the left gable window; now it peered out with bulging, horror-filled eyes from the window directly opposite. It seemed to hover there, crazed by fear, narcotized to act. The face seemed to be bodiless, swaying there like a fearful spirit looking on its own doom.

Jonathan Newman had never been a superstitious man. He had scoffed at ghosts and specters as figments of neurotic minds; but now—

At this moment the face at the window gathered arms. Thin, white fingers clutched at the remaining boards, hammered them weakly, impotently. Had the vision been fashioned from futile cotton batting, it could not have made flabbier onslaughts.

Then a long, wailing cry came to Jonathan Newman's ears. Now he knew that he gazed on no astral phenomenon, no spirit manifestation, conjured from the flame-ridden, evil house!

He knew that sound, that voice, and his blood curdled in his veins. That was his own nephew, the last of the Newmans, caught like a rat in a flaming cage, too terrified to show any vestige of reasoning sense!

Jonathan Newman didn't know how long he watched the feeble, fluttering attempts of Douglas in the scarlet light of the mounting fury. It was probably but the space of seconds. To a man on the brink of indecision, time drags out into æons, or ceases to exist at all.

Finally the gentle humanity that was his heritage stirred within him. It welled up in him and surged over him like a retarded seventh wave. It galvanized him into belated action, and sent him at a crouching trot racing straight for the house.

As he ran, he thought, a thousand ideas chasing themselves squirrel-like through his brain. Douglas must not perish in that way! That was murder—a ghastly, horrid reckoning!

He couldn't enter the house—that was suicide. The trees, now! No — too far away from the windows. No piazzas!

As his fire-bright eyes continued to stare at the house, as if to drag some answer from it by sheer force of will, a line of silver glinted along the eaves, running to within arm's distance of the window where he had last seen Douglas. This was a stout, galvanized iron pipe installed with the modernizing of the house.

In a twinkling Newman caught the pipe, and went up as he had done in the years gone by, shinnying with desperate, rejuvenating agility. His long arms and legs pushed him forward and upward; but he seemed to go by inches, a human worm clinging to a reptilian length of metal.

He wondered if the pipe would hold. It did. Foot by foot, he continued his arduous pilgrimage.

Now he was opposite the second-floor windows. Now he slipped back a foot, to go forward with redoubled fury. Now his eyes were on a level with the sill of the window where Douglas had last peered forth. Now he was above it. It wasn't three feet away.

Could he make it? Could he cling until he recovered himself sufficiently to pull his dead weight in?

He didn't hesitate. He flung one long, scrawny arm to the window. It caught the boards which still half covered the expanse. Would they hold? He would have to risk it!

The boards creaked; but with a flash of his other hand he caught the sill and pulled himself astride it. He was half blocked by the two boards, one of which dangled down where he had opened it for the upstairs draft, a self-made fan for the flames.

"Douglas!" he cried shrilly. "Douglas! Douglas!"

No answer.

The light irritated his eyes, the smoke and the fumes clogged his throat. Again and again he rasped out the word. Still no answer!

Finally he pulled in his second, dangling leg and was lost to view.

VIII

With the tooting of many horns, the somewhat antiquated village fire department tore toward the house at the crossroads. Old Dr. Prentagast, coming home from a nocturnal visit, and glimpsing the flames, had alarmed the village.

Pandemonium broke loose. When the would-be extinguishers reached the place, a blotch of crimson already patched the sky, making the evergreens stand out stark and stiff, like black sentinels hemming in the dervish-dancing flames.

Two figures suddenly fluttered to view in a rear window, one carrying the other. In record time the rescuers ran a ladder to the sill. Two volunteers raced up the rungs; but the tall, gaunt figure in black shook its head peremptorily.

Scorning help, Jonathan Newman stepped out like an automaton, and mechanically began the descent with the limp, sagging form in his arms. He staggered out upon the flame-lighted ground.

The crowd billowed forward. A ripple grew and swelled like the sound of mounting flames:

"It's Jonathan Newman! It's Jonathan Newman! Who's he carrying?"

As he deposited his unconscious burden on the ground, again the crowd surged forward. A black muffler hid the unconscious man's features from view. Newman stripped the muffler from the pale face.

"It's Douglas Newman!" the crowd cried, in recognition.

Slowly Jonathan Newman straightened up from the ground. The crowd cowed back aghast. They saw the wan, smoked features, the flapping, scorched clothes; but they beheld more in the pitiless, bright glare of the flames. Jonathan Newman's neck lay bared to their gaze. On it, running from ear to ear, ran a livid, recently healed scar.

With a grim, set face Newman addressed the constable, pointing to his nephew.

"That man is wanted for murder. Once too often, out of dangerous pride, I cheated justice."

He pointed at the jagged slash searing his throat.

"Once too often I hid the act of his murderous hand, because of the name he bore; but I now deliver him up to justice, even as the flames shall deliver up this house that has wrought only havoc. Neither it nor my nephew shall menace society again!"

So the house at the crossroads breathed its last, even as it had breathed its first, in retributive blood and in avenging flames.

A BALLADE OF GENTLEMEN

À bas with this! *À bas* with that!
And even God himself must go—
So roars the proletariat,
As to the winds the past they throw.
Who knows the least the most *must* know,
And brute shall be the lord of brain;
But some day, sure as rivers flow,
They'll need us gentlemen again.

The sans-culotte, the sans-cravate,
Unwashed, unshaved, and proudly so,
Kick us and wax exceeding fat,
Bossing their little hour the show.
Crowns and silk hats, with Villon's snow,
Vanish, while brutes and bounders reign;
Yet, though it be we must lie low,
They'll need us gentlemen again.

As sure, exiled aristocrat,
As out of mud proud lilies grow,
Nature was never democrat.
Equality, thou poor Rousseau,
Hath nature for eternal foe.
Reverence and honor not in vain
Were planted in us long ago;
They'll need us gentlemen again.

ENVOI

Prince, though they toss us to and fro,
"*Noblesse oblige*" shall still remain;
Nothing's so certain here below—
They'll need us gentlemen again!

Richard Le Gallienne

Timeworn Town

THE STORY OF THE STRANGE MURDER MYSTERY IN HISTORIC HATHELSBOROUGH

By J. S. Fletcher

Author of "The Town of Crooked Ways," "The Harvest Moon," etc.

XXII

BRENT received Tansley's warning with a curious tightening of lips and setting of jaw which the solicitor, during their brief acquaintance, had come to know well enough. It meant that the young man's fighting spirit was roused.

Tansley laughed.

"You're the sort of fellow for a scrap, Brent," he remarked. "I think you can move pretty fast, too; but you don't know this crew, or their resources. Whatever anybody may say, and whatever men like your late cousin, and Epplewhite, and any of the so-called progressives—I'm not one, myself, for it pays me to belong to neither party—whatever these folks may think or say, Simon Crood and his lot are top dogs in this little old town! Vested interests, my boy—an ancient tree, with roots firmly fixed in the piled-up soil, strata upon strata, of a thousand years! You're not going to pull up those roots, my lad!"

"How will Simon Crood smash me?" demanded Brent quietly.

"As to the exact how," answered Tansley, "I can't say. Mole work—but he'll set the electors in the Castle Ward against you."

"I have enough promises of support now to give me a majority," retorted Brent.

"That for promises!" exclaimed Tansley, snapping his fingers. "You don't know Hathelsborough people. They'll promise you their support to your face, just to get rid of your presence on their doorstep—and vote against you when they reach the ballot box. I'll lay anything most of the people you've been to see have promised their support to both candidates."

"Why should these people support such robbers as Crood and his gang?" demanded Brent.

"Because Crood and his crew represent the only God they worship," said Tansley, with a cynical laugh. "Bran, as they call it! All that most Hathelsborough men think about is bran—money. Get money where you can—never mind how, as long as you get it, and keep just within the law. Simon Crood represents the Hathelsborough principle of graft. Whatever you may think, he's the paramount influence in the town to-day."

"He and his lot have only got the barest majority in the council," remarked Brent.

"Maybe, but they've got all the really influential men behind 'em—the moneyed men," said Tansley. "And they've distributed all the official posts—sinecures, most of 'em—among their friends. That town trustee business is the nut to crack here, Brent; and a nut that's been hardening for centuries isn't going to be cracked with an ordinary implement. Are you an extraordinary one?"

"I'll make a try at things, anyhow," replied Brent. "I don't believe I shall lose that election, either."

"You might have scraped in if you hadn't carried Simon Crood's niece away from under his very nose," said Tansley; "but now that you've brought personal matters into the quarrel, the old chap will move every piece he has on the board to checkmate you. It wouldn't do to have you on the council, Brent! You're too much of an innovator. Now this town—the real town — doesn't want innovation. Innovation in an ancient borough like this is unsettling and uncomfortable—see?"

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" This world doesn't stand still," retorted Brent. " I'm going ahead!"

But he reflected, as he left the lawyer's office, that much of what Tansley had said was true. There was something baffling in the very atmosphere of Hathelsborough, and he felt like a man who fights the wind. Everything was elusive, ungraspable, evasive. He seemed to get no further forward.

If Tansley was right in affirming that Hathelsborough people made promises which they had no intention of redeeming, Brent's chances of getting a seat in the town council, and setting to work to rebuild his late cousin's schemes of reformation, were small indeed; but once more he set his jaw and nerved himself to endeavor. As the day of election was now close at hand, he plunged into the task of canvassing and persuading—wondering all the time, now that he had heard Tansley's cynical remarks, if the people to whom he talked, and most of whom were plausible and ingratiating in their reception of him, were in reality laughing at him for his pains.

He saw little of the efforts of the other side; but Peppermore agreed with Tansley that the opposition would leave no stone unturned in the task of beating him. The *Monitor* was all for Brent. Peppermore's proprietor was a Progressive—a tradesman who had bought up the *Monitor* for a mere song, and ran it as a business speculation which had so far turned out very satisfactorily. Consequently, at this period, Brent went much to the office of the local newspaper, and did things in concert with Peppermore, inspiring articles which, to say the least, were severely critical of the methods of the Crood régime.

On one of these visits Peppermore, in the middle of a discussion about one of these effusions, abruptly switched off the trend of his thought in another direction.

" I had a visit from Mrs. Saumarez this morning, Mr. Brent," he said, eying his companion with a knowing look. " Pretty and accomplished woman, that, sir; but queer, Mr. Brent—queer!"

" What do you mean?" asked Brent.

" Odd ideas, sir—very odd!" replied Peppermore. " Wanted to find out from me, Mr. Brent, if, in case she's called up again at this inquest business, or if circumstances arise which necessitate police proceedings at which she might be a witness, her name couldn't be suppressed. Ever hear such a proposal, sir, to make to a journalist?

" ' Impossible, my dear madam!' says I. ' Publicity, ma'am,' I says, ' is—well, it's the very salt of life, as you might term it,' I says. ' When gentlemen of our profession report public affairs, we keep nothing back,' I says—firmly, sir.

" ' I very much object to my name figuring in these proceedings,' she says. ' I object very strongly indeed!'

" ' Can't help it, ma'am,' says I. ' If the highest in the land was called into a witness box, and I reported the case,' I says, ' I should have to give the name. It's the glory of our profession, Mrs. Saumarez,' I says; ' just as it's that of the law that we don't countenance hole-and-corner business. The light of day, ma'am, the light of day—that's the idea, Mrs. Saumarez!' I says. ' Let the clear, unclouded radiance of high noon, ma'am, shine on!'

" You know what I mean, Mr. Brent," Peppermore went on. " As I said to her, the publicity that's attendant on all this sort of thing in England is one of the very finest of our national institutions. Odd, sir, for a woman that's supposed to be modern and progressive, but she didn't agree.

" ' I don't want to see my name in the papers in connection with this affair, Mr. Peppermore,' she declared again. ' I thought, perhaps,' she says rather coaxingly, ' that you could suggest some way of keeping it out, if there are any further proceedings.'

" ' Can't, ma'am,' says I. ' If such an eventuality comes to be, it 'll be my duty to record faithfully and fully in the *Monitor* whatever takes place.'

" ' Oh!' says she. ' But it's not the *Monitor* that I so much object to—it's the London papers. I understand that you supply reports of local news to them, Mr. Peppermore.'

" Well, of course, as you know, Mr. Brent, I am district correspondent for two of the big London agencies, but I had to explain to her that in a sensational case like this the London papers generally sent down men of their own. There were, for instance, two or three London reporters present the other day. Yes, she said; so she'd heard, and she'd bought all the London papers to see if her name was mentioned, and had been relieved to find that it hadn't. There was nothing but summarized reports, and her name hadn't appeared anywhere but in the *Monitor*.

"'And what I wanted, Mr. Peppermore,' she says, more wheedlingly than ever, 'was that, if it lay in your power, and if occasion arises, you would do what you could to keep my name out of it. I don't want publicity.'

"Um!" concluded Peppermore. "Pretty woman, Mr. Brent, and with taking ways, but of course I had to be adamant, sir—firm, Mr. Brent, firm as St. Hathelswide's tower.

"'The press, Mrs. Saumarez,' I says, as I dismissed the matter—politely, of course—'the press, ma'am, has its duties. It can make no exception, Mrs. Saumarez, to wealth, or rank, or—beauty.' I made her a nice bow, Mr. Brent, as I spoke the last word, but she wasn't impressed. As I say, a queer woman! What does publicity matter to her, so long as she's no more than a witness?"

Brent was not particularly impressed by Peppermore's story. He saw nothing in it beyond the natural desire of a sensitive, high-strung woman to keep herself aloof from an unpleasant episode, and he said so.

"I don't see what good Hawthwaite hoped to get by ever calling Mrs. Saumarez before the coroner," he added. "She told nothing that everybody didn't know. What did it all amount to?"

"Aye, but that's just it, in a town like this, Mr. Brent," answered Peppermore, with a wink. "I can tell you why the police put the coroner up to calling Mrs. Saumarez as a witness. They had a theory that Wellesley killed your cousin in a fit of jealousy, of which she was the cause, and they hoped to substantiate it through her evidence. There's no doubt, sir, that there were love passages between Dr. Wellesley and this attractive lady, and between her and your cousin; but—shall I tell you, sir, something that's in my mind?"

"Yes—why not?" answered Brent. He was thinking of the thick pile of letters that he had returned to Mrs. Saumarez, and of the unmistakable love tokens that he had seen deposited with them in the casket wherein Wallingford had kept them. "What is it you're thinking of?"

Peppermore edged his chair closer to his visitor's, and lowered his voice.

"I am not unobservant, Mr. Brent," he said. "Our profession, as you know, sir, leads us to the cultivation of that faculty. Now I've thought a good deal about this matter, and I'll tell you a conclusion I've come to. Do you remember that when Dr. Wellesley was being questioned, the other day, he was asked if there was jealousy between him and Mr. Wallingford about Mrs. Saumarez? To be sure! Now what did he answer? He answered frankly that *there had been, but it no longer existed!* Do you know what I deduced from that, Mr. Brent? This—that the little lady had had both those men as strings to her bow at the same time, being undecided as to which of 'em she'd finally choose, but that, not so long since, she'd given up both of 'em in favor of a third man!"

Brent started, and laughed.

"Ingenious, Peppermore—very ingenious!" he said. "Given 'em both the mitten, as they say? But—the third man?"

"Mrs. Saumarez was away on the continent most of the winter," answered Peppermore. "The Riviera—Nice—Monte Carlo—that sort of thing. She may have met somebody there that she preferred to either Wellesley or Wallingford. Anyhow, Mr. Brent, what did the doctor mean when he frankly admitted that there had been jealousy between him and Wallingford, but that it *no longer existed?* He meant, I take it, that there was no reason for its further existence. That implies that another man had come into the arena!"

"Aye, but does it?" said Brent. "It might mean something else—that she'd finally accepted Wellesley. Eh?"

"No!" declared Peppermore. "She's not engaged to Wellesley. I'll lay anything she isn't, Mr. Brent. There's a third man, somewhere in the background; and it's my opinion that that's the reason why she doesn't want the publicity she came to me about."

Brent fell into a new train of thought, more or less confused. Mrs. Saumarez's talk to him about Wallingford, and the letters, and the things in the casket, were all mixed up in it.

"Had you any opportunity of seeing Wellesley and Wallingford together during the last week or two before my cousin's death?" he asked presently.

"Several opportunities, Mr. Brent," answered Peppermore. "I went to report the proceedings of two or three committees of the town council during the fortnight preceding that lamentable occurrence, sir, and I saw them at close quarters. I saw them frequently at the club of which I am a member. I should say, sir, from what I observed, that they were on very good terms with each other—more friendly than ever, Mr. Brent."

"Um!" said Brent. "Well, there's a lot of queer stuff about this affair, Peppermore; but let's get back to the business of the moment. Look here, I've got a fine notion for your *Monitor,* and you'll just have time to get it out before my election day. Let's make a real, vigorous, uncompromising attack on the *principle* of the town trustee business. We'll not say one word about the present trustees—old Crood, Mallett, and Coppinger. We'll have no personalities, and we'll make no charges. We'll avoid all stuff of that sort. We'll just attack the thing on principle, taking the line that it's a bad principle that the finances of a borough should be intrusted to the sole control of three men responsible to nobody, and with the power, if one dies, to elect his successor. Let's argue it out on the principle. Then, later, we'll have another article on the argument that the finances of a town should be wholly controlled by the elected representatives of the people—see?"

"Your late cousin's theories, Mr. Brent," said Peppermore. "Excellent notions, both, sir. You write the articles—I'll find the space. All on principle—no personalities. Plain and practical, Mr. Brent, let them be, so that everybody can understand; though, to be sure," he added regretfully, "what our readers most like is personalities. If we dared to slate old Crood with all the abuse we could lay our pens to, the readers of the *Monitor,* sir, would hug themselves with pleasure; but libel, Mr. Brent—libel. Do you know, sir, that ever since I occupied the editorial chair of state I have always felt that the wet blanket of the law of libel sat at my banquet like the ghost in 'Macbeth,' letting its sword hang by a thread an inch from my cranium? A bit mixed in my metaphors, I fear, sir, but you know what I mean. Mustn't involve my respected proprietor in a libel suit, Mr. Brent; so stick to abstract principles, sir, and eschew those saucy personal touches which I regret—deeply regret—I can't print."

Brent had no intention of indulging in personalities in his warfare with Simon Crood and the reactionaries; but as the day of the election approached he discovered that his adversaries were not at all particular about putting forth highly personal references to himself. Hathelsborough suddenly became flooded with handbills and posters, each bearing a few pithy words in enormous type. These effusions were for the most part in the form of questions, addressed to the recipients, and there was a cynical and sinister sneer in all of them:

> Who *is* Mr. Brent?
> Why support a stranger?
> Who wants a carpetbagger?
> Vote for the homemade article!
> Let Hathelsborough men manage Hathelsborough matters!
> Stand by the true and tried!

These appeals to the free and enlightened burgesses whose suffrages he solicited met Brent on every side, and especially on the day of the election. He had gone in for nothing of this sort himself. His original election address, it seemed to him, contained everything that he had to say, and beyond posting it all over the town in great placards, and distributing it in the form of handbills to the electors of the Castle Ward, he had issued nothing in the shape of political literature.

He had stumped his desired constituency thoroughly, making speeches at every street corner and at every public meeting place, and he had a personal conviction, from his usual reception on these occasions, that the people were with him. He was still sure of victory when, at noon on the polling day, he chanced to meet Tansley.

"Going strong, as far as I can make out," he answered, in response to the solicitor's inquiry. "I've been about all the morning, and from what I've seen, and what my committee tell me, I'm in!"

Tansley shook his head.

"Look here, my lad!" he said, drawing Brent aside, as they stood together in the Market Place. "Don't you build too high! They're working against you to-day, the Crood gang, as they never worked in their lives. They're bringing every influence they can get hold of against you; and—you haven't been overwise."

"What have I done now?" demanded Brent.

"Those articles that are appearing in the *Monitor,*" replied Tansley. "Everybody knows they're yours. Do you think there's a soul in Hathelsborough who believes that Peppermore could write them? They're a mistake. They may be true—"

"They are true!" growled Brent.

"Granted; but however true they are, they're an attack on Hathelsborough," said Tansley. "Now, of whatever political color they are, Hathelsborough folk are Hathelsborough folk, and they're prouder of this old town than you know. Look around you, my lad. There isn't a stone that you can see that wasn't just where it is now hundreds of years before you were born. Do you think these people like to hear you, a stranger, criticizing their old customs, their old privileges, as you are doing in those articles? Not a bit of it! They're asking who you are to come judging them. You'd have done a lot better, Brent, if you'd been more diplomatic. You should have left all politics and reforms out of it, and tried to win the seat simply on your relationship to Wallingford. You could have shown your cards when you'd got in. You've shown 'em too soon!"

"That be damned!" said Brent. "I've played the game straightforwardly, anyhow. I don't want any underhand business. There's enough of that in this rotten place now. I still think I shall be in!"

Before the summer evening had progressed far, Brent learned that the vested interests of an ancient English borough are stronger than he thought. He was hopelessly defeated. Not many more than a hundred voters marked their papers for him, and his opponent was returned by a big majority.

He got a new idea when he heard the result, and went straight off to Peppermore and the *Monitor* with it. They would go on with the articles, and make them of such a nature that the Local Government Board, in London, would find it absolutely necessary to give prompt and searching attention to Hathelsborough and its affairs.

XXIII

By business time next morning Brent had cast aside all thought of the previous day's proceedings, and of his defeat at the hands of the old gang, and had turned to affairs which were now of much greater importance.

He had three separate enterprises in hand. To be sure, they were all related, but each had a distinctive character of its own. He specified all three as he ate his breakfast at the Chancellor, where he was still located.

First, now that he had done with his electioneering—for the time being—he was going to work harder than ever at the task of discovering Wallingford's murderer.

Second, he was going to marry Queenie, and that speedily. Queenie and he had settled matters to their mutual satisfaction as soon as the row with Simon Crood was over, and they had already begun furnishing the house which Brent had bought in order to constitute himself a full-fledged burgess of Hathelsborough.

Third, he was going to put all he knew into the articles that he was writing for the *Monitor* — two of which had already appeared. He resolved to continue them until public opinion, gradually educated, became too strong for the reactionary forces which had beaten him yesterday, but which he would infallibly defeat to-morrow—or, if not to-morrow, the day after.

First, the murderer. Brent fetched Queenie from Mrs. Appleyard's that morning, and, utterly careless of the sly looks that were cast on him and her, marched her through the Market Place to the police station. To Hawthwaite, keenly interested, he detailed particulars of Queenie's discovery about the typewritten letter, and produced her proofs.

Hawthwaite took it all in, silently.

"You'll have to go into that, you know," concluded Brent. "Now that I've got through with that election, I'm going to give more time to this business. We've got to find out who murdered my cousin, Hawthwaite, somehow. It's not going to rest. I won't leave a stone unturned; and there," he added, pointing to the sheet on which Queenie had made specimens of the broken type of Simon's antiquated machine, "there is a stone which needs examining on all four sides!"

Hawthwaite picked up the sheet of paper, twisted it in his big fingers, and looked over it at the two young people, with a quizzical smile.

"I understand that you and Miss Queenie are contemplating matrimony, Mr. Brent," he remarked. "That so, sir?"

"That's so," replied Brent promptly. "As soon as we've got our house furnished, we shall be married."

"Then I can speak freely and in confidence before Mrs. Brent that's to be," responded Hawthwaite, with another smile. "Well, now, what you've just told me isn't exactly fresh news to me. I'll show you something." He turned, drew out a drawer from a chest behind his chair, and, finding a paper in it, took out the document and handed it to his visitors. " Look at that, now," he said. " You see what it is?"

Brent saw at once. It was a half sheet of note paper, on which were examples of faulty type, precisely similar to those on Queenie's bit of evidence.

" Hello!" exclaimed Brent. " Somebody else been at the same game, eh?"

" I'll tell you," answered Hawthwaite, settling himself in his chair. " It's a few days ago—let me think, now—yes, it would be a day or two after that facsimile appeared in the *Monitor* that a young man came to me here one evening—a respectable artisan sort of chap. He told me that he was in the employ of a typewriter company at Clothford, which, as you know, is only a few miles away. He said that he'd come to tell me something in confidence. The previous day, he said, Mr. Crood, of Hathelsborough, had come to their place in Clothford, bringing with him an old-fashioned typewriter, which, he told them, he had bought when such things first came out. He wanted to know—the thing being, he said, an old favorite—if they couldn't do it up for him—go through its mechanism thoroughly—supply new letters, and so on. They said they could. He left it to be rebuilt, and it was handed over to this young man. Now this young man, my informant, has some relations here in Hathelsborough. A day or so before Simon Crood called with his machine, they sent him — the young man—a copy of the *Monitor* with this facsimile letter inclosed. Being concerned with such things in his trade, he was naturally interested in the facsimile, and, of course, as an expert, he noticed the broken letters. However, he didn't connect the facsimile with Crood's typewriter—not at first; but, happening to look at the machine more narrowly, to see exactly what had to be done to it, he ran off the keys, as he phrased it, on a sheet of paper. Then he saw at once that he had before him the identical machine on which the threatening letter to our late mayor had been typed; and so he came to me."

" What have you done about it?" asked Brent.

Hawthwaite gave him a knowing look.

" Well, I'll tell you that, too," he answered. " I've got the machine. It's there —in that box, in the corner. The Clothford firm will make an excuse to Mr. Crood that they've had to send it away for repairs. Of course, I'm not going to let it out of my possession until—well, until we know more."

" There's no doubt he wrote that threatening letter," observed Brent.

" Oh, no doubt — no doubt whatever," agreed Hawthwaite.

" What about that handkerchief, and the inquiry at the laundry?" asked Brent.

Hawthwaite accompanied his reply with a nod and a wink.

" That's being followed up," he said. " Don't ask me any more just now. We're progressing, and, I believe, in the right direction, this time. Do you leave it to us, Mr. Brent—you'll be surprised before long, and so will some other folks. You go on with those articles you've started in the *Monitor*—it doesn't do for me to say much, being an official," he added, with another wink, " but you'll do some good in that way—there's a lot under the surface in this old town, sir, that only needs exposing to the light of day to insure destruction! Public opinion, Mr. Brent, public opinion —you stir it up, and leave this matter to me. I may be slow, Mr. Brent, but I'll surely get there in the end!"

" Good—it's all I ask," said Brent. " Only get there!"

He took Queenie away, but before they had gone many steps from the superintendent's office, Hawthwaite called Brent back, and leading him inside the room, closed the door on him.

" Your young lady 'll not mind waiting a minute or two," he said, with a significant glance. " As she already knew about old Simon's typewriter, I didn't mind telling that I knew, d'ye see? But there's another little matter that I'd like to tell you about. It's between ourselves, and to go no further—you understand?"

" Just so," agreed Brent.

" Well," continued Hawthwaite, " there may be nothing in it; but nothing definite was got out of either Dr. Wellesley or Mrs. Saumarez about their—well, I won't say their love affairs, but their relations. That there was something mysterious about the sort of three-cornered relations between her and Wellesley and your cousin I'm as dead certain as that I see you. I have an idea, too, that somehow or other those relations have something to do with your cousin's murder. Now this is my point—you know, I dare say, that at the back of Mrs. Saumarez's garden, at the Abbey House, there's a quiet, narrow lane, little used?"

"I know it," replied Brent. "Farthing Lane, I think it is."

"Just so, and why so called none of our local antiquaries know," said Hawthwaite. "Well, not so many nights ago, I had some business in that lane at a late hour. I was watching for somebody, as a matter of fact, though it came to nothing. I was in a secret place, just as it was getting nicely dark. Now, then, who should come along that lane but Krevin Crood?"

"Krevin Crood!" exclaimed Brent. "Aye?"

"Krevin Crood," repeated Hawthwaite. "Thinks I to myself, 'What may you be doing here, my lad, at this hour of the night?' For, as you know that lane, Mr. Brent, you'll know that on one side of it there's nothing but the long wall of Mrs. Saumarez's garden and grounds, and on the other a belt of trees that shuts off Robinson's market garden and orchards. I was safe hidden among those trees. Well, Krevin came along—I recognized him well enough. He sort of loitered about, evidently waiting for somebody. Just as the parish church clock struck ten, I heard the click of a latch, the door in Mrs. Saumarez's back garden opened, and a woman came out. I knew her, too."

"Not Mrs. Saumarez?" suggested Brent.

"No," replied Hawthwaite, "not Mrs. Saumarez, but that companion of hers, Mrs. Elstrick. Tall, thin, very reserved woman. You may have noticed that she goes about the town very quietly—never talks to anybody."

"I've scarcely noticed her except when she was here in court with Mrs. Saumarez," replied Brent; "but I know the woman you mean. So it was she?"

"Just so—Mrs. Elstrick," said Hawthwaite. "I saw, of course, that this was a put-up job, an arranged meeting between her and Krevin. They met, turned, and walked up and down the lane together for a good ten minutes, talking in whispers. They passed and repassed me several times, and I'd have given a good deal to hear what they were talking about; but I couldn't catch a word. They were on the opposite side of the lane, you see, close to the garden wall."

"And eventually?" asked Brent.

"Oh, eventually they parted, of course," replied Hawthwaite. "She slipped back into the garden, and he went off down the lane. Now—"

"They're both tending to elderliness, I think," interrupted Brent, with a cynical laugh; "but one should never be surprised at anything, nowadays. Did you see any love-making?"

"Oh, Lord save us, no!" exclaimed Hawthwaite. "Nothing of that sort! They never even shook hands. Just talked —and very earnestly, too."

Brent reflected for a while.

"Queer!" he said at last. "What did they want with each other?"

"Aye!" said Hawthwaite. "As I said just now, I'd have given a good deal to know. Krevin Crood is a deep, designing, secret sort of man, and that woman, whoever she may be, looks just the same."

"Has she been with Mrs. Saumarez long?" asked Brent.

"Came with her when Mrs. Saumarez first took the Abbey House," replied Hawthwaite. "Always been with her. Went away with her when Mrs. S. was in the south of France all last winter. Odd couple I call the two of 'em, Mr. Brent, between you and myself."

"Why, exactly?" inquired Brent. "I've seen nothing particularly odd about Mrs. Saumarez, except that she's evidently a high-strung and perhaps a rather excitable sort of woman—all nerves, I should say, and possibly a bit emotional. Clever woman, I think, and pretty."

"Pretty enough, and clever enough," assented Hawthwaite dryly. "I dare say you're right about the rest; but I'll tell you why I called her odd. When she first came here, it was understood that she was the widow of a naval officer of high rank. Well, naturally, the big folk of the neighborhood called on her when she had settled down—she furnished and fitted her house from local shops, and it took her some time to get fixed up—expecting, of course, that she would return their calls. She never returned a single one—not one, sir!"

"That sounds odd," admitted Brent.

"Aye, doesn't it?" said Hawthwaite. "You'd have thought that a young and stylish woman, coming to live here, as she did, would have been glad of society; but though some dozen or so ladies of the place called on her, she never, as I say, returned a single call. In fact, it very soon became evident that she didn't want any society of that sort. She used to go out bicycling a good deal by herself in those early days. That, I fancy, was how she got to know both Wellesley and your cousin. She was fond enough of their society, anyhow."

"Always?" asked Brent. He was learning things that he had never heard of, and was already thinking deeply about them. "From the beginning?"

"Well, practically," replied Hawthwaite. "First it was the doctor—then it was Wallingford; and," he added, with a wink, "there are people in the town who declare that she carried on with both, playing one off against the other, till the very end. I don't know how that may be, but I do know that at one time she and Wellesley were very thick, and that afterward your cousin was always running after her. Naturally, there was talk, especially among those who had called on her, and whose calls she didn't return. To tell you the plain truth, they said things."

"What sort of things?" inquired Brent.

"Oh, well!" said Hawthwaite, with a laugh. "If you had lived as long in this town as I have, and been in my position, you'd know that it, like all small towns, is a hotbed of scandal and gossip. The women, of course, seeing her partiality for men friends, said much and hinted more. Then the vicar's wife—parsons' ladies are great ones for talk—found something out, and made the most of it. I told you that when Mrs. Saumarez first came here, it was understood that she was the widow of an officer of high position in the Royal Navy. Well, our vicar's wife has a brother who's a big man in that profession, and she was curious to know about the newcomer's relation to it. She persisted in calling on Mrs. Saumarez, though her calls weren't returned. She could make excuses, you see, about parish matters, and charities, and what not. One day she asked Mrs. Saumarez point-blank what ship her late husband had last served on. Mrs. S., it seems, answered her very short. 'My late husband,' she says, 'was not in the British service.' Of course, that wasn't in her favor with the people whom she'd already snubbed."

"H-m!" said Brent. There were many things in this retailing of gossip that he wanted to think over at leisure. "Well," he added, after a pause, "I dare say all sorts of small items help toward a solution, Hawthwaite; but you're already busy about it."

"I'm not only busy, but actively so," replied the superintendent. "And—again between you and me and nobody else—I'm expecting some very special professional and expert assistance within the next few days. Oh, you leave this to me, Mr. Brent! I'll run down your cousin's murderer yet! Go on with your articles. They're rousing public interest."

Brent went away, and followed Hawthwaite's advice. His articles came out in the *Monitor* twice a week. Peppermore printed them in big type, leaded, and gave them the most prominent place in the paper. He himself was as proud of these uncompromising attacks on the municipal government of Hathelsborough as if he had written them himself. The proprietor of the *Monitor* was placidly agreeable about them, for the simple reason that after the first two had appeared the circulation of his journal doubled, and after the next three was at least four times what it had ever been before.

Everybody in the neighborhood read and discussed the articles. Extracts from them were given in the county papers, and some of the London dailies began to lift them. Eventually a local member of Parliament asked a question about them in the House of Commons; and one day Peppermore came rushing to Brent in a state of high excitement.

"The pen *is* mightier than the sword, Mr. Brent, sir—that's a fact!" he gasped, tumbling headlong into Brent's room. "Heard the news, sir? It's all through your articles!"

"Heard nothing," replied Brent. "What is it?"

"I had it from the town clerk just now, so it's gospel truth," replied Peppermore. "The Local Government Board, sir, is at last moved to action. It's going to send down an inspector—a real, full-fledged inspector! The town clerk is in a worse state of righteous indignation than I ever saw a man, and as for Mayor Simon Crood, I understand his anger is beyond belief. Mr. Brent, you've done it."

But Brent was not so sure. He had had some experience of government officials, and of official methods, and knew more of red tape than Peppermore did.

As for Tansley, who came in soon after, he was cynically scornful.

"Local Government Board inspector!" he exclaimed scoffingly. "Some old fossil who'll come here—I'll tell you how! He'll ask for the responsible authorities—that's Simon Crood & Co. He'll hear all they've got to say. They'll say just what they like. He'll examine their documents, which will be all ready for him. Everything will be nice and proper and in strict order, and every man will say precisely what he's been ordered to say—and there you are! The inspector will issue his report, stating that he has carefully examined everything and found all correct, and the comedy will conclude with the farce of votes of thanks all around. That's the line, Brent!"

"Maybe it is," said Brent; "but—only maybe!"

"You're in a pessimistic vein, Mr. Tansley, sir," declared Peppermore. "Sir, we're going to clean out the Augean stable."

"Or perish in the attempt, eh, Peppermore?" retorted Tansley good-humoredly. "All right, my lad; but it 'll take a lot more than *Monitor* articles and Local Government Board inquiries to uproot the ancient and time-honored customs of Hathelsborough. *Semper eadem,* Peppermore, *semper eadem*—that's the motto of this high-principled, respectably ruled borough. Always the same—and no change!"

"Except from bad to worse," said Peppermore. "All right, sir; but something's going to happen this time!"

Something did happen immediately following on the official announcement of the Local Government Board inquiry, and it was Tansley who told Brent of it.

"I say," he said, coming up to Brent in the street, "here's a queer business! I don't know if you've heard of it. Mrs. Mallett has run away from her husband—fact! She's cleared out, and she's let it be known, too. Mysteries are increasing, Brent. What do you make of it?"

Brent could make nothing of it. There might be many reasons why Mrs. Mallett should leave her husband; but had this sudden retreat anything to do with her evidence at the inquest?

He was speculating on this when he received a request from Hawthwaite to go around at once to his office. Brent responded immediately—to find the superintendent closeted with Dr. Wellesley.

XXIV

Before Brent dropped into the chair to which Hawthwaite silently pointed him, he knew that he was about to hear revelations. He was conscious of an atmosphere in that drab, somber little room. Hawthwaite's glance at him as he entered was that of a man who bids another to prepare himself for news. Wellesley looked unusually stern and perplexed.

"Dr. Wellesley asked me to send for you, Mr. Brent," said the superintendent. "He has something to tell which he thinks you, as next of kin to our late mayor, ought to know."

Brent nodded, and turned, in silence, to Wellesley. The doctor, who had been staring moodily at the fireless grate, looked up, glancing from one man to the other.

"You understand, Mr. Brent, and you, Hawthwaite, that whatever I tell you is told in the very strictest confidence?" he said. "As you say, Hawthwaite, I think it's something that both of you ought to know. Can I speak in confidence?"

"To me—yes, you can," answered Brent.

"It 'll not go beyond me, doctor," said Hawthwaite, with a smile. "I'm used to this sort of job. I've heard more secrets and private communications in my time than I can remember, and I've clean forgotten most of 'em."

"Very well," agreed Wellesley. "This is strictly private, then—at present. Now, to begin with, I suppose you have heard—it's pretty well known through the town, I understand—that Mrs. Mallett has left her husband?"

"Aye," replied Hawthwaite. "I've heard that."

"Yes," said Brent. "I, too."

"I dare say you both gathered from the evidence—mine and Mrs. Mallett's—at the adjourned inquest, that there was some mystery underlying her visit to me?" continued Wellesley. "Some secret, eh?"

"Couldn't very well gather anything else, doctor," replied Hawthwaite.

"The fact of the case is," said Wellesley suddenly, "that wasn't the first visit Mrs. Mallett had paid to me—and to Wallingford—in that way. She had come twice before during that week. On the first occasion she only saw me. On the second, she and I saw Wallingford together, in the mayor's parlor. On the third—the one we gave evidence about—she went to see Wallingford alone; but, as she told you, she found he was engaged, so she came away."

The three men looked at one another. Hawthwaite voiced what two of the three were thinking.

"Some business which concerned all three of you, then, doctor?" he suggested.

"Business which deeply concerned her, and on which she came to consult me and Wallingford," replied Wellesley. "Now I'll tell you straight out what it was. Mrs. Mallett had found out that there was some sort of an intrigue between her husband and Mrs. Saumarez."

For a moment a deep silence fell over the room. Brent felt his brows drawing together in a frown—the sort of frown that spreads over a man's face when he tries to think quickly over a problem unexpectedly presented to him. Hawthwaite folded his arms across his braided tunic, stared at the ceiling, and whistled softly. He was the first to speak.

"Indeed!" he said. "So that's — but she would have some good evidence, doctor, for an assertion of that sort—not mere guesswork?"

"I'm afraid there's no guesswork about it," said Wellesley. "It's not a pleasant matter to discuss, but that's unavoidable now. I'll tell you what Mrs. Mallett told Wallingford and myself. As you know, she's a downright, plain-spoken woman, with strong views of her own, and just the sort to go through with a thing. Some little time ago she found, evidently through Mallett's carelessness, a receipt for a valuable diamond ring from a London jeweler —a lady's ring. This, of course, aroused her suspicions. Without saying anything to her husband, she determined to have his movements watched. She knew that Mallett was frequently going away for a day at a time, ostensibly on business connected with the bank; and she employed a private inquiry agent to watch him. This man followed Mallett from Hathelsborough to Clothford one morning, and from Clothford station to the Royal County Hotel. There, in the lounge, he was joined by Mrs. Saumarez, who had been previously pointed out to the agent here in Hathelsborough, and who had evidently cycled over to Clothford. She and Mallett lunched at the Royal County in a private room, and spent the greater part of the afternoon there. The same thing occurred on two other occasions. Then Mrs. Mallett came to me and to Wallingford."

"Why to you?" demanded Brent.

"I think," replied Wellesley, with a forced smile, "she may have had a womanish feeling of revenge, knowing that both Wallingford and myself had—well, we had paid a good deal of attention to Mrs. Saumarez. But there were other reasons. Mrs. Mallett has few friends in the town. I was her medical attendant, and she and Wallingford frequently met on one or two committees, for she took a good deal of interest in social affairs. Anyhow, she came and confided in us about this."

"I supposed you and Wallingford discussed it?" suggested Brent.

"Yes," replied Wellesley; "briefly—on the night before his death."

"Was that the reason of your saying at the inquest that there was no jealousy between you, at the time of his death, as regards Mrs. Saumarez?"

"Just so! There couldn't be any jealousy, could there, after what we had heard?"

"You believed it, then?"

"We couldn't do anything else. The man whom Mrs. Mallett employed is a thoroughly dependable man."

"And that's the reason for her sudden flight—if you call it so—is it, doctor?" asked Hawthwaite.

"That's the reason for it—yes," replied Wellesley.

"What is she going to do?" inquired Hawthwaite. "Divorce?"

"She said something about a legal separation," answered Wellesley. "I suppose it will come to the other thing."

"And how do you think this is related to Wallingford's murder?" asked Hawthwaite, with sudden directness. "Let's be plain, doctor. Do you suspect Mallett?"

Wellesley showed signs of indecision.

"I don't like to say that I do," he replied at last; "and yet I don't know. I've rather wondered if there had been any meeting between Mallett and Wallingford after Wallingford knew about this. I believe they did meet, on business, during the day. Now, to tell you the truth, Wallingford was much more—shall we say upset?—about this affair than I was. He was very much gone on Mrs. Saumarez. It has struck me that he may have threatened Mallett with exposure; and exposure, of course, would mean a great deal to a man in Mallett's position. And—but I really don't know what to think."

"There's a thing I'd like to know," said Brent. "What do you think about the woman in the case? You've had chances of knowing her."

Wellesley gave his questioner a searching look.

"I would rather not say, Mr. Brent," he replied. "Discoveries of this sort, fully substantiated, are — well, disconcerting. Besides, they tend to a revision of opinion. They're sidelights—unfortunate ones."

"Look here!" said Brent. "Were you greatly surprised?"

"Well, looking back," responded Wellesley thoughtfully, "perhaps not greatly. I think she's a bit of a mystery."

Brent turned to Hawthwaite. Hawthwaite, however, looked at the doctor.

"Well, doctor," he said, "I think you've done right to tell this. There's something in the suggestion that there may have been a fatal quarrel between Mallett and Wallingford; but—I don't want to go into this at present—I'm full up otherwise. Leave it until this Local Government Board inspection is over."

"Why until then?" asked Wellesley.

"Why, because, for anything we know to the contrary, something may come out at that which will dovetail into this," replied Hawthwaite. "The inspector is coming down at once. Why not let this go over till he's been here? Another thing—has Mrs. Mallett let this out to anybody but you?"

"No—I'm sure of that," answered Wellesley. "It has been known in the town for some time—common knowledge—that she and Mallett weren't on good terms, but she assured me just before leaving that she hasn't mentioned the episodes I've detailed to any other person here than myself—and of course, Wallingford."

"And he's gone, poor fellow!" said Hawthwaite. "Mr. Brent and myself will be secret as the grave he lies in. All right, doctor—just leave it to me!"

When Wellesley had gone away, Hawthwaite turned to Brent.

"I don't believe for one moment that Mallett murdered your cousin," he said. "I'm not surprised about this other affair, but I don't think it has anything to do with what we're after. No—that's on a side track; but I'll tell you what, Mr. Brent—I shouldn't be astonished if I found out that Mallett knows who the murderer is."

"I wish you'd tell me if you've any idea yourself who the murderer is!" exclaimed Brent. "I'm wearying to get at something concrete!"

"Well, if you must have it, I have an idea," answered the superintendent. "It's a strong idea, too. I'm working at it. To tell you the truth, though nobody knows it but one or two of my trusted men, I've had a very clever man down from New Scotland Yard for the past fortnight. He went away yesterday. He was of great assistance in unearthing certain facts. I'm only waiting now for some expert evidence on a very important point, which I can't get until next week, in order to make a move. As soon as ever this Local Government Board inspection is over, I'll make that move. And how do you think that inspection will turn out, Mr. Brent?"

"Don't know—can't say—no idea," replied Brent.

"Nor have I," remarked Hawthwaite. "I never expect much from public inquiries. There's too much officialism about 'em. Still, every little helps."

These conversations, and the revelations which had transpired during their course, led Brent into a new train of thought. Ever since his coming to Hathelsborough, he had been aware of an atmosphere of intrigue and mystery; and every new development seemed to thicken it. Here, again, was more intrigue, centering in a domestic imbroglio.

There was nothing much to be wondered at in it, he thought. Mallett was the sort of man to attract a certain type of woman, and, from all Brent had heard in the town, a man given to adventure. Mrs. Saumarez was clearly a woman fond of men's society. Mrs. Mallett, on the other hand, was a hard, strait-laced sort, given to social work, and to the furtherance of movements in which her husband took no interest at all.

The sequence of events seemed probable to Brent. First there had been Wellesley; then Wallingford, perhaps a cleverly contrived double affair with both. Recently there had been this affair with Mallett, which, from Wellesley's showing, had come to Wallingford's ears. Brent knew his cousin sufficiently well to know that the late mayor would develop an ugly frame of mind on finding that he had been deceived. All sorts of things might well have developed out of a sudden discovery.

But had all this anything to do with Wallingford's murder? To him, after all, that was the main point; and so far he saw no obvious connection. He felt like a man who is presented with a mass of tangled cord, from which protrude a dozen loose ends. He did not know, for the very life of him, which end he could pull out without making the tangle worse.

It puzzled him, being still a stranger to the habits and customs of these people, to see that life in Hathelsborough went on, amid all these alarms and excursions, very much as usual. He had already cultivated a habit of frequenting places of public resort, such as the smoking room of his hotel, the big barroom at Bull's, and the rooms of the Town Club, of which he had been elected a member on Tansley's nomination. At all these places he heard a great deal of gossip, but found no surprise shown at its subjects.

Within a day or two, everybody who frequented these places knew that there had been a domestic upheaval at Mallett's, and had at least some idea of the true reason of it; but nobody showed any astonishment. Everybody, indeed, seemed to take it as a matter of course.

Apparently it made no great difference to Mallett himself, who was seen about the town just as usual, in his accustomed haunts. And when Brent remarked on this seeming indifference to Epplewhite, with whom he sometimes conversed at the club, Epplewhite only laughed.

" If you knew this town and its people as well as I do, Mr. Brent," he said, " you'd know that things of this sort are viewed in a light in which outsiders probably wouldn't view them. The underhand affairs and secret intrigues that exist here are multitudinous. Hathelsborough folk have a fixed standard—do what you like, as long as you don't get found out. Understand, sir?"

" But in this case the thing seems to have been found out," remarked Brent.

" That, in the Hathelsborough mental economy, is the only mistake in it," replied Epplewhite dryly. " It's the only thing that Mallett will be blamed for. Lord bless you, do you think he's the only man in the place who has had such an affair? Hathelsborough people—men and women—are past masters and mistresses at secrecy and deception. If you could take the top off this town, and look deep down under it—ah, there would be something to see! But, as I dare say you're beginning to find out, that's no easy job."

" Will the top be lifted at this Local Government Board inspection?" asked Brent.

Epplewhite shook his head.

" I doubt it, sir," he answered. " I doubt it very much. I've seen too much of officialism, Mr. Brent, to cherish any great hopes of it. I'll tell you what 'll probably happen when this inspector comes. To start with, he's bound to be more or less in the hands of the officials. We know who they are—the three town trustees and the staff under them. Do you think they won't prepare their books and documents in such a fashion as to insure getting a report in their favor? Of course! And what's to stop it? Who's to interfere?"

" I suppose he will hear both sides of the question," suggested Brent.

" Who is there to put the other side of the question—except on broad lines, such as you've taken up in your *Monitor* articles?" asked Epplewhite. " True, the inspector can ask for information and for criticism, and for any facts bearing on the subject; but who'll come forward to give them? Can I? Can Wellesley? Can any of our party? Not one, in any satisfactory fashion. We've nothing but impressions and suspicions to go on. We haven't access to the books and papers. The only man who could have done something was your cousin, our late mayor, and he's gone. Talking about that, Mr. Brent, there's a matter that I've been thinking a good deal about lately, and I think it should be put to Hawthwaite. You know, of course, that your cousin and I were very friendly. That came out in my evidence when the inquest was first opened. Well, he used to tell me things about his investigation of the borough finances, and I happen to know that he kept his notes and figures about them in a certain memorandum book—a thickish one, with a stout red leather cover—which he always carried about with him. He would have it on him, or on his desk in the mayor's parlor, when he met his death, I'm certain. Now, then, where is that book?"

" That's highly important," said Brent. " I never heard of the book. It certainly wasn't on him, and it wasn't on the desk, for I examined that myself, in company with the police."

" Well, he had such a book, and search should be made for it," remarked Epplewhite. " If it could have been produced at this inquiry, some good might have come of it; but as things are, I see little hope of any change. Vested interests and old customs aren't upset in a day, Mr. Brent."

Brent was soon to discover that Tansley and Epplewhite were correct in their prophecies about the investigation which he himself had so strenuously advocated in his articles. The Local Government Board inspector came. He sat in the Moot Hall for two days, in public. He examined the ancient charters and deeds. He questioned the town trustees. He went through the books. He invited criticism and objections, and got nothing but a general statement of the policy of the reforming party from Epplewhite, as its leader. That party, said Epplewhite, objected to the old constitution as being outworn, and wished for a more modern arrangement.

Finally, the inspector, referring to the articles in the *Monitor,* which had led to the holding of the inquiry, expressed a wish to see and question their writer.

Brent stood up, in the midst of a crowded court, and confessed himself sole author of the articles in question.

"Why did you write them?" inquired the inspector.

"From a sense of public duty," replied Brent.

"But I understand that you are a stranger, or a comparative stranger, to the town?" suggested the inspector.

"I am a burgess, a resident, and a property owner in the town. I took up this work—which I mean to see through—in succession to my cousin, John Wallingford, late mayor of this borough, who was murdered in this very hall," said Brent. "There are men here who know that he was working day and night to bring about the financial reforms which I advocate."

The inspector moved uneasily in his seat at the sound of the word which Brent emphasized in his reference to his cousin.

"I am sure I sympathize with you, Mr. Brent," he said. "I have been much grieved to hear of the late mayor's sad fate. You say you have voluntarily taken up his work. Did he leave you any facts, figures, statistics, particulars, to work on?"

"If he had known that I was going to take up his work, he would doubtless have left me plenty," replied Brent; "but he was murdered. He had such things—a certain notebook, filled with his discoveries."

"Where is that book?" inquired the inspector. "Can it be produced?"

"It cannot," said Brent. "It seems to have been stolen when my cousin was killed."

The inspector hesitated, shuffling his papers.

"Then you have no figures, facts, anything, Mr. Brent?" he said presently. "Nothing to support your newspaper articles?"

"Nothing of that sort," answered Brent. "My articles refer wholly to the general principle of the thing."

The inspector smiled.

"I'm afraid governments, national or municipal, aren't run on general principles, Mr. Brent," he remarked.

"No!" said Brent. "They seem to be run on the lack of them!"

The official inquiry came to an end on that, amid good-humored laughter at Brent's retort. The inspector announced that he would issue his report in due course, and everybody knew what it would be. The good old ways, the time-honored customs, would have another lease of life. Once more Simon Crood had won.

As he was leaving the Moot Hall, Brent felt his arm touched, and turned to see Hawthwaite. The superintendent gave him a knowing look.

"To-morrow!" he whispered. "Be prepared! All's done—all's ready!"

XXV

BRENT heard what the superintendent said, nodded a silent reply, and five minutes later had put that particular thing clean out of his mind.

During the progress of the Local Government Board inquiry he had learned something—that men like Tansley and Epplewhite knew a lot more about Hathelsborough and Hathelsborough folk than he knew, or than Wallingford had known, despite the murdered man's longer experience of town and people. Reform was not going to be carried out in a day in that timeworn borough, nor were its ancient customs, rotten and corrupt as they were, to be uprooted by newspaper articles. So far, Simon Crood and his gang had won all along the line.

Brent realized that most men in his position would have given up the contest and retired from the field in weariness and disgust; but he was not going to give up or to retire. He had a feeling, amounting to something near akin to a superstition, that it was his sacred duty to carry on his dead cousin's work, especially as Wallingford, by leaving him all his money, had provided him with the means of doing it. There in Hathelsborough he was, and in Hathelsborough he would stick, holding on like a bulldog to the enemy.

" I'm not counted out!" he said that evening, talking the proceedings of the day over with Queenie. " I'm up again and ready for the next round. Here I am, and here I stop! But—new tactics! Permeation—that's the ticket. Reckon I'll filtrate and percolate the waters of pure truth into these people in such a fashion that they'll come to see that what that old uncle of yours and his precious satellites have been giving 'em was nothing but a very muddy mixture. Permeation—that's the game in future!"

Queenie scarcely knew what he meant; but she gathered a sense of it from the set of his square jaw and the flash of his gray eyes. Being increasingly in love with him, it was incomprehensible to her that anybody could beat Brent at any game he took a hand in.

" The inquiry was a cut and dried business," remarked Queenie. " Of course, the accounts and things would be cooked. Uncle Simon and Mallett and Coppinger would see to that. They'll have an extra bottle to-night over this victory; and if they could only hear to-morrow that you're going to clear out, their joy would be full."

" Well, I'm not!" declared Brent. " Instead of clearing out, I'm going to dig in. I guess they'll find me intrenched more firmly than ever before long. We'll get at that to-morrow, now that this hollow inquiry's over."

Queenie understood him perfectly that time. He and she were furnishing the house which Brent had purchased in order to get a proper legal footing in Hathelsborough. It was serious and fascinating work, necessitating much searching of the shops wherein antique furniture was stored, much consultation with decorators, much consideration of style and effect.

Brent quickly discovered that Queenie was a young woman of artistic taste, with a natural knowledge and appreciation of color schemes and values. Queenie found out that Brent had a positive horror of the merely modern. Consequently, this furnishing and decorating business took up all their spare time. Queenie eventually spent all hers at the house, superintending and arranging. Brent was there when he was not writing his *Monitor* articles or interviewing Hawthwaite.

The unproductive inquiry had broken into this domestic adventure, but Brent now proposed to go ahead with it until it was finished. Then he and Queenie would quietly get married and settle down. Hathelsborough, he remarked, might not want him, but there in Hathelsborough he had set up his tent, and the pegs were firmly driven in.

On the day succeeding the Local Government Board inquiry, Brent and Queenie had spent morning, afternoon, and the first part of the evening at the house, at the head of a small gang of workmen, and had reduced at least half of the chaos to order. As dusk grew near, Brent put on his coat and gave Queenie a look which signified that no answer was needed to what he was about to say.

" That's enough!" he said. " Dog tired! Now we'll go round to the Chancellor and get the best dinner they can give us. Put on your hat!"

Queenie obeyed readily enough. She was in that stage whereat a young woman finds obedience the most delightful thing in the world. Brent locked up the house, and they started toward the hotel.

In the old Market Square the lamps were just being lighted. As usual, there were groups of townsfolk gathered about High Cross and Low Cross, and the pavements were thronged with strolling pedestrians. Something suggested to Brent that these people were discussing some news of moment. He heard excited voices. Once or twice men glanced inquisitively at Queenie and himself as they walked toward the Chancellor. On the steps outside the hotel a knot of men, among them the landlord, were plainly in deep debate; but they became silent as Queenie and Brent passed in.

Brent, after ushering Queenie into the inner hall, turned back to them.

" Something new happened?" he asked.

The men looked at one another. The landlord, with a glance in Queenie's direction, replied, lowering his voice.

" Then you haven't heard, Mr. Brent?" he said. " I thought you'd have known. Hawthwaite has arrested Krevin Crood—for the murder."

In spite of his usual self-possession, Brent started.

"What?" he exclaimed. "Krevin?"

"Krevin and Simon—both of them," answered the landlord. "Got 'em at seven o'clock. They're in the police station—cells, of course. Nice business—the mayor of a town arrested for the murder of his predecessor!"

"As far as I can make out, Simon is charged with being accessory," remarked one of the other men. "Krevin's the culprit in chief."

"Well, there they both are, anyhow," said the landlord. "If I know anything about the law, it's as serious a thing to be accessory to a murder as to be the principal. What do you say, Mr. Brent?"

Brent made no reply. He was thinking. So this was what Hawthwaite had meant when he said, the day before, that all was ready! He wished the superintendent had been a little more explicit. There was Queenie to consider.

Without further remark to the group of gossipers, he turned on his heel, went back to her, and took her into the coffee room, to the table which was always specially reserved for him. Not until Queenie had eaten her dinner did he tell her of what he had learned.

"So now there's going to be hell for a time, girly!" he said in conclusion. "No end of unpleasantness for me—and for you, considering that these men are your own people. All the more reason why you and I should stick together like leeches. Not all the Simons and the Krevins in the world are going to make any difference between you and me. We'll just go forward as if they didn't exist, whatever comes out. Come along, and I'll see you home to Mother Appleyard's. Then I'll drop in on Hawthwaite and learn all about it."

"Do—do you think they did it?" asked Queenie, in a fearful whisper. "Actually?"

"God knows!" muttered Brent. "I'll be damned if I do—or if I know what to think; but Hawthwaite must have good grounds for this!"

He saw Queenie safely home to Mrs. Appleyard's, and hurried off to the police station, where he found the superintendent alone in his office.

"You've heard?" said Hawthwaite.

"I've heard," replied Brent. "I wish you'd given me an idea—a hint!"

Hawthwaite shook his head. There was something peculiarly emphatic in the superintendent's gesture.

"Mr. Brent," he said solemnly, "I wouldn't have given the king himself a hint! I had reasons—good reasons—for keeping the thing a profound secret until I could strike. As it is, I've been foiled. I've got Simon and Krevin Crood safely under lock and key, but I haven't got the other two."

"What other two?" exclaimed Brent.

Hawthwaite smiled sourly.

"What other two?" he repeated. "Why, Mallett and Coppinger. They're off—though how the devil they got wind of what was going on I can't think. Leaked out somehow."

"You suspect them, too?" asked Brent.

"Suspect them?" sneered Hawthwaite. "Lord! You wait till Simon and Krevin are brought up before the magistrates to-morrow morning! We've got the whole evidence so absolutely full and clear that we can go full steam ahead with the case to-morrow. Meeking will prosecute, and I hope to get 'em committed before the afternoon's over."

"Look here!" said Brent. "Tell me—what's the line? How does the thing stand?"

"Thus," replied Hawthwaite. "We shall charge Krevin with the murder of your cousin, and Simon with being accessory to the fact."

"Before or after?" asked Brent.

"Before."

"How about the other two—Mallett and Coppinger?"

"Same charge as Simon."

Brent took a turn about the room.

"That," he remarked, pausing at last in front of Hawthwaite's desk, "means that there was a conspiracy?"

"To be sure!" assented Hawthwaite. "Got proof of it!"

"Then I wish you had laid hands on Mallett and Coppinger," said Brent. "You've no idea of their whereabouts, I suppose?"

"None, so far," replied Hawthwaite; "nor can I make out how or precisely when they slipped off. Oddly enough, Mrs. Mallett's back in the town. I saw and spoke to her an hour ago. Of course, she knows nothing about Mallett. She didn't come back to him. I don't know what she came back for. She's staying with friends, down in Waterdale."

"What time will these men be brought up to-morrow morning?" asked Brent.

"At ten o'clock sharp," answered Hawthwaite; "and I hope that before the end of the afternoon they'll have been committed to take their trial. As I said just now, we can go straight on. Careful preparation makes speedy achievement, Mr. Brent; and by the Lord Harry, we've done some preparing!"

"If only the whole thing is cleared at last!" said Brent quietly. "You think it will be?"

Hawthwaite smacked his hand on his blotting pad.

"Haven't the shadow of a doubt, Mr. Brent, that Krevin Crood murdered your cousin!" he asserted. "You'll hear for yourself to-morrow. Come early. A word of advice—"

"Yes?" prompted Brent.

"Leave your young lady at home," said Hawthwaite. "No need for her feelings to be upset. They're her uncles, these two, after all, you know. Don't bring her."

"No, of course," assented Brent. "Never intended to."

He went away to his hotel, sorely puzzled. Hawthwaite seemed positively confident that he had solved the problem at last; but was Hawthwaite right? Somehow Brent could scarcely think of Krevin Crood as a cold-blooded murderer, nor did it seem probable to him that calculating, scheming men like Simon Crood, Mallett, and Coppinger would calmly plot assassination, and thereby endanger their own safety.

One thing, anyhow, seemed certain—if Wallingford's knowledge of the financial iniquities of the town trustees was so deep as to lead them to commit murder as the only way of compelling his silence, then those iniquities must have been formidable indeed. The great and extraordinary wonder was that the rascals had been able to cloak them so thoroughly and successfully.

Brent was early in attendance at the court room of the Moot Hall next morning. For a particular reason of his own, he selected a seat in close proximity to the door. Long before the magistrates had filed upon the bench, the whole place was packed, and Hawthwaite, passing him, whispered that there were hundreds of people in the Market Square who could not get in.

Everybody of any note in Hathelsborough was on hand. Brent particularly observed the presence of Mrs. Mallett, who, heavily veiled, sat just beneath him. He looked in vain, however, for Mrs. Saumarez; but in a corner near one of the exits he saw her companion, Mrs. Elstrick, the woman whom Hawthwaite had seen in secret conversation with Krevin Crood in Farthing Lane.

Tansley caught sight of Brent, and, leaving the solicitors' table in the well of the court, went over to him.

"What are you doing perched out there?" he asked. "Come down with me. I'll find room for you."

"No, thank you," said Brent. "I'm all right here. I may have to leave. I'm not on in this affair. It's Hawthwaite's show. Is he right, this time?"

"God knows," replied the lawyer. "Hawthwaite has something up his sleeve. Queerest business ever I knew! Simon Crood! If it had been Krevin alone, now—here, I'll sit by you. I'm not on, either—nobody's instructed me. You'll not notice it, but there's never been such a show of magistrates on that bench for many a year, if ever. Every magistrate in the place present—and the chief magistrate to be in the dock presently! That's dramatic effect, if you like!"

Brent was watching the dock. The prisoners came into it by a stairway at the back. Krevin came first. Cool, collected, calmly defiant—outwardly, he was less concerned than any spectator. Simon shambled heavily forward, his big, flabby face colored with angry resentment and shame. He beckoned to his solicitor, and began to talk eagerly to him over the separating partition. Evidently he was all nerves and eagerness; but Krevin, after a careful look around the court, during which he exchanged nods with several of his acquaintances, stood staring reflectively at Meeking, as if speculating on what the famous barrister was going to say in opening the case.

Meeking said little. The prisoners, he observed, addressing the bench in quiet, conversational tones, were charged, Krevin Crood with the actual murder of the late mayor, John Wallingford; Simon, with being accessory to the fact. If they had not absconded during the previous twenty-four hours, two other well known residents of the borough, Stephen Mallett and James Coppinger, would have stood in the dock with Simon Crood, similarly charged.

He would show their worships, he went on, by the evidence which he would produce, that patient and exhaustive investigation by the local police had brought to light as wicked a conspiracy as could well be imagined. There could be no doubt in the mind of any reasonable person, after hearing that evidence, that Simon Crood, Mallett, and Coppinger entered into a plot to rid themselves of a man who, had his investigations continued, would infallibly have exposed their nefarious practices to the community, nor that they employed Krevin Crood to carry out their designs.

He would show that the murder of Wallingford was deliberately plotted at Mallett's house, between the four men, on a certain particular date, and that Krevin Crood committed the actual murder on the following evening. Thanks to the particularly able and careful fashion in which Superintendent Hawthwaite had marshaled the damning body of evidence against these men, their worships would have no difficulty in deciding that there was a *prima facie* case against them, and that they must be committed to take their trial at the next assizes.

Hawthwaite, called first, gave evidence as to the arrest of the two prisoners. He arrested Krevin Crood in the passage leading from Bull's Snug, about half past six the previous evening, and Simon Crood at his own house, half an hour later. Krevin took the matter calmly, and merely remarked that he, Hawthwaite, was making the biggest mistake he had ever made in his life. Simon manifested great anger and indignation, and threatened an action for false imprisonment.

The superintendent stood down, and Meeking looked toward an inner door of the court. An attendant came forward at his nod, bearing a heavy package done up in canvas, and sealed.

At the same moment a smart-looking young man answered to the name of Samuel Owthwaite, and stepped alertly into the witness box.

XXVI

THE tightly wedged mass of spectators watched, open-mouthed and quivering with anticipation, while the attendant, at Meeking's whispered bidding, broke the seals and cut the strings of the package that he had just carried in. Clearly, this was some piece of material evidence—but what?

A faint murmur of interest arose as the last wrappings fell aside and revealed a typewriter, somewhat the worse for wear. People glanced from it to the witness. Some of those present recognized him as a young mechanic, a native of Hathelsborough, who had gone, a few years previously, to work in the neighboring city of Clothford. They began to ask themselves what he could have to do with this case, and waited eagerly for his evidence.

Meeking, with the battered typewriter before him, kept the witness waiting. Turning to the bench, he put in the depositions taken at the coroner's inquest with respect to the threatening letter sent to Wallingford, and by him intrusted to Epplewhite. He also offered the letter itself, and the facsimile published as a supplement by the *Monitor*, with a brief explanation of his reasons for bringing them into evidence.

Then he addressed himself to his witness, and got the first facts from him. Samuel Owthwaite—mechanic—employed by Green & Polford, of Clothford, agents for all the leading firms of typewriter manufacturers.

"I believe you're a native of Hathelsborough, aren't you, Owthwaite?" began Meeking.

"I am, sir."

"You keep up your interest in the old place, eh?"

"I do, sir."

"Have you any relations in the town?"

"Yes, sir—several."

"Do they send you the Hathelsborough paper, the *Monitor*, every week?"

"Yes, sir, regularly."

"Did they send you a copy of the *Monitor* in which there was a facsimile of the threatening letter addressed to the late mayor by some anonymous correspondent?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you look at the facsimile?"

"I did, sir."

"Notice anything peculiar or distinctive about it?"

"Yes, sir—I noticed that some of the letters were broken, and some defective."

"You noticed that as an expert mechanic, working at these things?"

"It was obvious to anybody, sir. The letters — some of them — were badly broken."

"Look at the dock, Owthwaite. Do you know the prisoner, Simon Crood?"

"Well enough, sir!"

"How long have you known him?"

"Ever since I was a youngster, sir."

"Have you ever seen Simon Crood at Green & Polford's, your employers?"

"I have, sir."

"When was that?"

"He came in two days after I'd seen the facsimile, sir."

"Bring anything with him?"

"Yes, sir—that typewriter before you."

"Sure it was this particular machine?"

"Positive, sir. It's an old Semmingford machine, No. 32,587."

"Did you hear the prisoner say anything about it?"

"I did, sir. He told our Mr. Jeaveson—manager, he is—that this was a machine he'd bought in London, many years ago; that the lettering seemed to be getting worn out, and that he wanted to know if we could supply new letters and do the machine up generally."

"Yes—what then?"

"Mr. Jeaveson said we could do so, and the machine was handed over to me for repair."

"Did you make any further discovery about it?"

"Yes, sir. That afternoon I just ran the lettering off, to see what defects there were. I found then that the broken and defective letters were identical with those in the facsimile letter that I'd seen in the *Monitor* two days before."

"Just come down here, Owthwaite. Take this sheet of paper, and run the letters off again, so that their worships can compare the broken and defective letters with those in the threatening letter. Now," continued Meeking, when the mechanic had complied with this suggestion and had gone back to the witness box, "what did you do on making this discovery?"

"I told Mr. Jeaveson about it, sir, and showed him what I meant. He discussed the matter with Mr. Polford, afterward, and it was decided that I should go over to Hathelsborough and see Mr. Hawthwaite, taking the machine with me."

"Did you do that?"

"Yes, sir—next day, in the evening."

"Did you tell Superintendent Hawthwaite of your discovery and hand the machine to him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did he have the machine wrapped and sealed up, in your presence?"

"He did, sir."

"This machine, now on the table?"

"That machine, sir."

"And this is the machine that the prisoner, Simon Crood, brought to Green & Polford's?"

"That's the machine, sir."

Meeking nodded to his witness, signifying that he had no more to ask; but before Owthwaite could leave the box, Stedman, the local solicitor with whom Simon Crood had held a whispered conversation on coming into court, rose and began to cross-examine him.

"Did you happen to be in Green & Polford's shop—the front shop, I mean—when Alderman Crood brought in that machine?" he asked.

"I was there at the time, sir," replied Owthwaite.

"Did he come quite openly?"

"Yes, sir—in a cab, as a matter of fact. The cabman carried in the machine."

"Did Alderman Crood say who he was?"

"Well, sir, to be exact, he saw me as soon as he came in, and recognized me. He said, 'Oh, a Hathelsborough lad, I see! You'll probably know me, young man!' Then he told Mr. Jeaveson and myself what he wanted."

"The whole business was quite open and aboveboard, then?"

"Quite so, sir."

"He drew your attention himself to the defects of the machine?"

"He did, sir."

"And this was after—not before—that facsimile appeared in the *Monitor?*"

"After, sir."

"Now I want a particularly careful answer, Owthwaite, to my next question. Did Alderman Crood ask you to get these repairs made immediately?"

"No, sir, he did not. He said he was in no hurry."

"You were to take your own time about them, the machine remaining with you?"

"Just that, sir."

Stedman sat down, as if satisfied, and Owthwaite left the witness box. At the calling of the next witness's name, Tansley nudged Brent.

"Now we may hear something lively!" he whispered. "This man has been the borough accountant for years, and I've often wondered if he doesn't know a good deal that he has kept to himself. If he does, will he let it out? Crood doesn't look overpleased to see him, anyhow!"

(*To be concluded in the December number of* MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE)

Our Local Lothario

WHY EDGERTON BAYNES, THE GAY DECEIVER, HAD TO LEAVE THE HIGHLY RESPECTABLE SUBURB OF ROSEDALE

By Lucille Van Slyke

I DARE say every locality has its gay *Lothario.* Ours was no exception; but our local gay deceiver was a little bit different from the usual impersonator of *Don Juan.*

It's always hard for men-folk to understand why women are such fools as to fall for such useless specimens; yet somehow there always seem to be at least half a dozen victims for each victimizer. I think there were more than half a dozen misguided women in Rosedale who had some sort of affair with our local *Lothario*—whose real name happened to be Edgerton Baynes.

It is neighborhood gossip that I was the person who caused him to leave our midst. Unfortunately, I had announced on the country club steps that I was going to see that he " got his "; and not twenty-four hours later I was seen to escort him, bag and baggage, to his train.

I've never been able to discuss it with anybody, not even with my Elsie. I felt like a cad not to, and yet, hang it, I'd have been a cad if I had. He was gone, and that was a relief to the men of the community, and to some of its women; but Elsie and I had had the most serious quarrel of our lives about him, and I never dreaded anything more than I dreaded explaining to her that he was gone.

How much Elsie really cared about him I had not been able to guess. It had looked to me, for several weeks, as if she was getting to care a lot; and I am not the sort of chap who can sit still and let anybody make a fool of the woman he has promised to love, and cherish, and endow with all his worldly goods. It's old-fashioned stuff, I suppose, to remember the exact wording of the wedding vows, but I'm pretty old-fashioned in that respect.

Elsie and I have been married for fourteen years, but you'd never guess it to look at her. She'd pass for less than thirty any day. I reckon it's her hair—fuzzy and blond as a kid's—that does it. Her laugh is young-sounding, too — almost a giggle, but not quite. Always makes me grin when she springs it, because it doesn't come often, but comes so pat when it does.

She's not exactly pretty, I suppose, but she's smart-looking; and the thing I've always been proudest about is her darned good sense. Why, she laughed harder than anybody at the women in our neighborhood who fell for Edgie's palaver.

It was from Elsie that I got my news. Elsie wouldn't gossip — I mean, she wouldn't talk over things like that with anybody but me; but she couldn't help listening in at the bridge tables when the anvil chorus began.

" Nobody in particular that I know of," she reported to me, when I expressed any curiosity about whom Edgie was pursuing; " but the bridge club does say that he's on the Hendersons' porch morning, noon, and night."

" If I were Jim Henderson, I'd kick him off," I told her.

" Why, Edgie's all right," she protested. " I'm quite sure that he doesn't do anything very dreadful. I consider him perfectly harmless."

" Harmless or not," I growled, " if I were Jim Henderson, I'd see that he quit sitting on my porch! You mark my words —some day dear Edgie will tackle the wrong family when he pulls this *Lothario* stuff. Some he-sized man is going to get sore and beat that ornamental person to a pulp!"

" You sound like a caption in the movies," Elsie assured me. " He's a little silly about women, but really he's rather nice in lots of ways."

That's what all the women seemed to think about him. Funny part was that none of them liked Mrs. Baynes, or even pretended to. I think she didn't give a whoop what they did. She kept pretty much to herself. Pottered around her garden, painted her porch furniture, and generally minded her own business.

The Bayneses didn't own their house, but they had lived in it for a good many years. They came to Rosedale just after the armistice was signed, I remember. Edgerton had been in the service, and was still wearing his uniform when they moved into the old Slocum house. Looked devilish well in war togs, too. I'll say this much for him—he never claimed to be any hero. Used to joke about how terrible it was fighting in Washington, D. C.

I should judge he was about forty when we first met him—hair slightly gray, dark eyes with a sparkle in 'em. He was agile as a boy just out of college. Wonderful dancer—never seemed to get tired, and always wheedling the orchestra leader for just one more. Played fairish tennis, average golf, and corking bridge, and had a score of parlor tricks that made even a Volstead dinner go with a splash. We all rather liked him the first six months.

He didn't seem to have an occupation after he gave up his commission. He used to go around joking about it. Said that one of the handicaps about being married to a wife who inherited money is that a chap hasn't any decent reason to get out and dig for a living.

"I make my cigarette money, buy my own postage stamps, and keep the lady love supplied with orchids," he would chuckle. "I'm no grub. We're only sure of living once, so we might as well do it gracefully!"

That, and "We're a long time dead, so why be dusty now?" seemed to be his only theories about life.

He was courtesy itself with Mrs. Baynes; and we all knew that she wasn't always courteous to him. She was rather irritable at times; but it never seemed to ruffle him.

"Just as you say, old dear," he'd answer.

She didn't exactly bawl him out, but she certainly would pick him up mighty short. She expected him to do a lot of fetching and carrying.

I guess she came honestly enough by her dictatorial manner, for her grandfather was old Ferry, the glass manufacturer, and everybody knows what a terror he was. He left a big fortune, with lots of strings tied to it, to be divided among more than twenty heirs; but whatever her share was, it was big enough to free Edgie from having to work like the rest of us.

The first year that they lived in Rosedale, they were still going about together. They joined the country club, and led the same sort of life that most folk live in the suburbs; but she was a sort of killjoy—played rotten bridge, didn't seem to care for dancing, and wasn't a good mixer at all. Gradually she got the stay at home habit. Queer-looking woman—tall and thin and dark, with very frigid manners. Witty as the deuce, but the kind that stung.

Edgie had a portrait of her hanging over their library fireplace. Somebody famous had painted it, and he was inordinately vain of it. It seems that his wife had given it to him for a wedding present; but it didn't look like her. It had what she lacked—a human look. The eyes seemed to look straight into yours and smile—a painter's trick. If the original was anywhere about, you looked at her—and it left you cold.

After that first year, none of us saw her near enough to look at her eyes. She went almost nowhere. Edgie went everywhere. He hung around the country club a lot. People got the habit of picking him up to fill in at a bridge, or to take the place of a missing dinner or dancing guest. Besides, he sang tenor—stuff about pale hands crushing out life, and desert sands, and love untold.

It was the second year before any of us noticed that he mostly sang at Fan Murray. Not that that meant much. Chances were that Fan encouraged him in doing it. She was that kind of woman. Had been awfully popular in a small town before her marriage, and had a flirtatious hangover.

Doc Murray didn't care. He boasted about it.

"I like competition," he'd say. "Shows what a compliment Fan paid me when she married me!"

II

THAT particular spring was a busy one for the doctor. It was an influenza spring. He was rushing around day and night, and

Fan was left pretty much to her own devices. She'd had her servants so long that her house ran itself. She had nothing in the world to do, so she just naturally gravitated to the only other idler in the community—Edgerton Baynes.

They danced and sang so much together that people talked. The least that anybody could say was that they showed bad taste to make themselves so conspicuous.

Fan herself fairly ate it up. She flaunted the affair in everybody's face except her husband's. She was on guard there, all right. Doc Murray knew the least about it of anybody.

They certainly were brazen. Nothing clandestine about it. They kept getting up parties, like the Thursday dances at the club.

We had always danced more or less in Rosedale, but we had never made a business of it. That spring we did. Fan and Edgie speeded up the whole crowd. They were the ones who suggested dancing teachers, and got a couple of professionals out from town to teach us new steps with fancy names.

I gasped when I got my bill.

" Look here, Elsie, have they sent me the bill for the whole shooting match?"

" That's for one-twentieth, darling," she said, leaning over my shoulder. " Twenty couples and—"

" But that's almost three hundred dollars. Our share couldn't be that!"

" The Trestles get a hundred an evening, the orchestra is forty more, and supper is—well, figure it out yourself."

" We used to turn on the phonograph and dance, and stop at the drug store for a plate of ice cream on the way home!" I groaned.

" No class at all, was there?" Elsie grinned.

I almost hit the roof when the bills for her dancing dresses and slippers began to arrive.

Mrs. Baynes didn't dance. She came one or two nights, but after that she stayed home. Edgie and Fan became even better dancers than the professionals.

At the end of the season we had a whale of an affair—people from all the near-by clubs and week-end parties. Fan and Edgie did an exhibition dance in costume, at midnight, for a surprise. It was an exhibition, all right, and a surprise, too—especially to Doc Murray.

Doc and Fan had a row that night. According to what their next-door neighbors whispered around, it lasted until morning; and the next week Fan went West for the summer.

III

SHE hadn't been gone more than a month before Edgerton was at it again. This time the fair recipient of his attentions was Grace Gordon.

If you could have seen Grace, you'd have known why it struck us all as mighty funny. Grace's normal weight is over a hundred and sixty. She was awfully pretty when she was a plump sixteen, and has a sort of pretty face yet, even if it does have two chins under it; but Grace was the best mother in the whole bunch. She used to bore us stiff talking about her kids, and telephoning back home every half hour, to see if they were properly covered up or something.

She had nearly reached a hundred and seventy that summer, and had taken up golf, which she frankly hated, in hopes of reducing.

Edgie became her partner. I'll say this—I never saw a belated love affair buck up a woman's looks more than Edgie's devotion bucked up Grace. She trained down to a hundred and thirty-five before fall, and got prettier and younger-looking every minute. You didn't need to worry any more about her boring you about the kids. She shipped all three off to boarding schools.

I guess Fred was like the rest of the Rosedale husbands—blind to what was going on in his own family until after everybody else was snickering over it.

It was getting to be demoralizing to the whole community. Why, most of us had bought our houses out there at about the same time. We had been like one big family in Rosedale, scrapping sometimes, getting on one another's nerves frequently, but standing by one another through births and deaths and fires and operations and sewer assessments.

Nothing that had happened before split the crowd up the way Edgie's love affairs did. Half the women in the place weren't speaking to the other half. All of them were sore on Grace, and everybody was so sorry for poor old Fred that they were uncomfortable even about discussing the weather with him.

By October, Grace had actually qualified for the finals in a State tournament. It sounds incredible, but she had done it. She ought to have done it when you consider that she had been spending practically her whole time on the links. She had had special made-to-order clubs, and lessons from McIntyre. McIntyre wouldn't come to Rosedale for just one pupil, so she and Edgie had canvassed the club until they snagged in about fifteen pupils who would take lessons.

That tournament had more class to it than anything we'd ever pulled off in our modest club before; but we sure did have to go down in our pockets. I got a dinky little cup, and reckoned afterward that I'd spent at least five hundred dollars to win it. Funny, too, because we had clubbed together and bought balls and other duffel wholesale.

Nobody was paying much attention to golf on the day of the tournament. Everybody was bubbling over with whispers about Grace Gordon and Edgie. He was caddying for her, but she was eating out of his hand.

" Steady, little girl!" I heard him whisper, just before she drove off.

The cooing tone in which he spoke to her made me want to wring his neck. I was no longer trying to be decent to the cad. Queer part was that the women folk weren't inclined to blame him in this affair. They said that Mrs. Baynes was getting too crabby, and that Grace was old enough to know better. Believe me, they blamed her enough!

Presently Fred knew they were talking, and we men knew that he knew it. Finally I couldn't stand it any longer. I went to him about it. He told me right off the bat where I could go.

Fred and I had been the best kind of pals for twenty years, and it cut me like the deuce. It left me madder than blazes at Edgie.

" My wife's golfing partner is her own business," Fred snapped at me, and told me where I could go if I didn't like Grace's friends and his friends.

Heaven alone knows where the affair would have ended if Grace's smallest kid hadn't providentially come down with typhoid. By the time she'd pulled the youngster through that, and taken him South for convalescence, talk had died away, and Grace had put on forty pounds and spectacles, and looked too middle-aged to tempt any homewrecker.

But you needn't think that our gay *Lothario* was neglecting his life work. Not he! Things seemed to have reached some sort of crisis between him and his wife. Mrs. Baynes had a new sleeping porch built, and there weren't any twin beds on it. She looked ghastly that winter. Why shouldn't she, with a perpetual philanderer for a husband?

There was nothing you could actually put your finger on. He was outwardly most polite to her, and was always lugging home books and flowers. Peace offerings they looked like to me, as if he was just a mite worried about his meal ticket.

IV

You could have knocked me over with a feather when Elsie tipped me off about Edgie's next lady love. It was Madge Jurgens—Madge, who hated social life of all kinds, who didn't appear at the country club once a season, who wouldn't dance or golf or bridge.

She was garden crazy, and had dabbled at it ever since they first bought at Rosedale. That particular spring the Jurgenses had sold their house at a tidy profit, and had bought a bigger place two miles farther out — " in acreage," as she expressed it; and hanging over her new garden wall was Don Juan Baynes.

I would have bet almost anything that Madge would have sent him flying the second time he intruded; but she didn't. Weeks came and weeks went, and he trotted perpetually at her side.

She told some of the women that she had never known a man who so adored flowers. It was enough to make a dog laugh to hear Madge explaining. It showed she had some conscience left.

Just after Christmas something definite happened at last.

Mrs. Baynes left for Nevada. Edgerton carried it off quite brazenly, and said she was visiting her mother for the winter. He rented their house to some elderly friends of his, reserving a couple of rooms for his own use.

Nobody went near his friends, and pretty much everybody but Madge Jurgens was letting him severely alone; but this seemed to bother him not in the least. Debonair as ever, always with a flower from Madge's greenhouse in his buttonhole, he frisked about as if he didn't know that the rest of us were snubbing him.

Madge, like her predecessors, braced up as to looks. She had her hair permanently waved and her suits made to order, and went around with the look of a woman who is enjoying her naughty past.

I caught a glimpse of them lunching in the Ritz, one day, with a very queer-looking woman who wasn't paying much attention to either of them. I don't mean to insinuate that I'm so narrow-minded that I don't think it's all right for men and women to lunch together, but their having that woman along made it look darned funny to me. Madge flushed when I stalked by them.

I went out on the same train with him that evening, and asked him loud and clear, when we were getting off:

"How's your wife?"

"Writes that the climate is wonderful," he chattered.

You simply couldn't faze him.

Hal Jurgens did something downright shrewd. Evidently he figured out that if he wanted to keep his Madgie he'd got to show her that he did. He began spending money on her. He indulged her to the last notch in the thing she cared most about—her garden. He got the most expensive landscape architect in the business. Can you see why? The architect was a woman, and she was always on the job. Madge was putty in her hands.

Edgie gave up. It looked as if he didn't care for three-sided sessions. He went about looking rather grave for a couple of weeks, with an odd speculative look in his eyes.

V

THIS part of the story hurts to tell. The dubious compliment came my way next. Edgerton Baynes unmistakably fixed his roving eyes on my Elsie.

It made me see red. As I told you in the first place, Elsie isn't pretty, but she is smart-looking, and I never saw her look smarter than she did last spring. You can say all you've a mind to, clothes *do* do it; and last spring Elsie had something that most women want—enough clothes of the right kind.

I didn't buy her those clothes. I couldn't have afforded them, and everybody in Rosedale knew I couldn't; but naturally neither Elsie nor I went around saying that I hadn't bought them. You see, she had come into a little legacy from a Western uncle—thirteen thousand six hundred, to be exact; and her smart clothes set her back a thumping lot.

"If I were you," I advised her, "I'd soak about ten thousand of that into something sure and solid, and blow the rest for something you've always wanted. You mayn't have another chance like this in your lifetime."

She crinkled her eyes at me and laughed her youthful little laugh.

"You perspicacious darling, to save your dear old masculine face by telling me to do what you know I'd do anyhow!"

But at that I hadn't a remote idea that she would blow pretty nearly three thousand on duds. Why, that girl had prided herself for years on how smart she could make herself look with just a little dab of money! But forth she blossomed in clothes that made half the women in the place look at her enviously, and the other half stare suspiciously.

She certainly did look like a little queen. I just stared at her myself as if she was somebody new. There was one hat with a saucy blue feather in it, just the color of her eyes, that made her look—well, provocative. I grabbed her and kissed her the first time I saw it, and took her to the theater that very night.

The play was one of those made-in-France things with a husband who's a fool, a wife who's a bigger fool, and a dude who's the biggest fool of all. Elsie watched the dude make love to the lady, and talked all the way home about how clever the actor was.

"Clever actor, nothing!" I snorted. "Just acts natural. That bird has been mixed up in a couple of divorce suits already. Some clever playwright has put a lot of pretty phrases into his loose-lipped mouth, and you women sit back and rave. How do you get that way?"

Elsie didn't answer me. She just crinkled up her eyes and laughed that same little laugh again. It wasn't until we were home that she put her hands on my shoulders and said:

"Aren't husbands funny?"

The next afternoon I had to walk home from the station. No Elsie to meet me! We have a car—a good little car, for all that it's three years old. I've taken darned good care of it; but I knew one tire was seedy. I was afraid she'd had trouble, but she hadn't. She had driven over to the country club, Hilda said. Fred Gordon gave me a lift over.

Our car was parked out by the tennis courts in front of the club. Hal Jurgens came sauntering down to meet me.

" Hello!" he grinned. " Elsie said, if you showed up, to tell you she'd be back home by dinner time. She and Edge Baynes started out the boulevard about an hour ago in his new car."

I just spilled over. After all, Hal and Fred had had the same dose, and had swallowed it. I jolly well let them know I didn't intend to. They tried to pull me off in a corner and shut me up, but I talked right out loud—that is, until Hal whispered something about the number of persons who were on the porch.

" Just the same," I snorted, as I jumped into my runabout, " you two can put this in your pipes and smoke it—I'm going to see that this ladybug gets his!"

Elsie didn't get in until dinner time. She had on a perfectly new hat, and had brought the Ryther's home with her, for all the world like a kid who drags his pals back from the swimming hole, so that his father won't lick him until after his first mad has worn off.

I had to stay bottled up until they left, and they didn't go until we had played three or four rubbers of rotten bridge. Elsie chattered along, as gay as could be. She said that the people who had rented Edgie's house were going to buy a new car, and that the agent had brought out one for them to look at, but they didn't want it.

" Perfect peach!" she giggled. " The agent was just killing. Edgie brought him over to the club. You really ought to have heard him! He lithpth. Can you imagine how he says ' thix-thylinder '? But he invited Edgie and me to ride into town with him, and Edgie dared me to, so we did; and I saw this hat, and bought it, and Edgie took me to tea in the rookiest place. He certainly is fun!"

The Rythers said nothing, but looked a great deal. I managed to keep hold of myself until they were out of sight, and then I cut loose. I laid down the law to Elsie. In plain United States. I said if the rest of the men were dubs enough to let Edgie pay their wives insulting attentions, it was none of my darned business; but I wasn't going to stand for any rinky dinks of that sort.

She blew right back at me. We didn't say the pretty, insinuating things that the actors in that play had said to each other. There was no slow music. It was all fireworks. We ragged out anything that came into our mouths. I don't know which one of us got madder; but I do know that in the end I lost my head completely, and ripped out something about women who spent every red cent they had for clothes, to attract the attention of men who weren't fit to associate with.

" You can stop right there!" she cried. " I'll spend my own money as I please, and for what I please, and it's nobody's business but my own what I buy. As for Edgie —well, nobody has anything on him except a lot of backbiting gossip that doesn't mean anything. I think I'm the best judge of whom I want to associate with; and until you've got down on your knees and apologized for the nasty, mean things you've been insinuating, I most positively don't want to associate with you!"

By gad, she meant it! She was packed and out of the house before nine the next morning! The whole neighborhood saw her go. And before she went, in the most brazen way in the world, she telephoned Edgie.

He was out. She left a message saying that she was going to Northampton, and would he please call her by long-distance telephone that evening. She was out of the house before I could realize what had happened.

Hottest day in May it was. I don't know how I lived through it. I sat in the side porch most of the time, watching for Edgie to come back. Words were no use with that kind of cur. I was going to go over and beat him up.

He didn't get back until dark. I loped straight over; but quick as I was, he had already stripped and was in his tub.

The old fools to whom he had rented sent me upstairs. He had arranged the front bedroom into a sort of sitting room. His wife's picture was over the fireplace. It gave me the creeps to have those eyes smiling down at me while I waited. Through the doorway I could see his duds strewn around; beyond it I could hear the water splashing and Edgie whistling.

" Out in a minute!" he called. " Have a smoke—they're on the table."

So was my mother-in-law's telephone number! I clenched my fists. I was getting so fed up with delays that in another moment I would have gone in and jabbed Edgie's good-looking face into his shower spray.

It was the ring of the telephone that stopped me.

" Jerry, answer, will you?"

His casual impertinence was maddening. I had a savage hope that it might be Elsie calling. It was long-distance—Nevada.

I thumped on his door. He came trailing out in his white robe, looking as clean and cool as if he were a decent chap instead of a fool philanderer.

" Hello! Hello!" He had difficulty with the connection. " Yes, to-morrow, I hope. Ought to make it by Friday. Just tell her that I love her, and that I'm coming to her!"

He shut his jaws grimly as he clamped the receiver into place.

Before I could get a word in, the bell was jangling again. His voice was far from steady as he answered.

" Evening, Elsie! You did? Unexpected, eh? You will? Why, I think I can. In fact, I know I can. I'll phone right away."

He paid no more heed to me than if I didn't exist. He looked drawn and old. He shut his eyes, gave a number to the operator, and began snapping out staccato like a gatling. He ordered an automobile agent to get a certain sedan to Elsie's mother's house in Northampton the next day, and another car delivered to his own address—to the persons in his house. He demanded the commissions due him, said he must have them the next day, and slammed the receiver in place, to lean back and stare up at his wife's portrait.

He began talking in that same forced staccato that he had used to the agent.

" Jerry, it's been hell! The only comfort I can get out of it is that Helen will never know what it's been. Poor old girl! She liked feeling rich, and I never had the nerve to tell her that she wasn't, any more. I told her that it was war-shrunk—that it had to be watched pretty close; but can you guess what it has meant to me to dig up enough to keep her even comfortable? I'm no business man—haven't any profession—couldn't land a job anywhere. All I could do was to split commissions with some regular agent every time I could wheedle some of the women into spending a piece of money. It's been uphill work; but something always turned up — like Madge's garden stuff, or Grace and the golf, or those dancers. Last week I didn't see a day clear ahead of me, but these two cars—well, the commish on one will get me West in time, I hope, and the commish on the other will just about buy poor Helen's coffin!"

VI

I TOOK him to his train in my battered roadster; but first I had to mix him a drink and pack his bags, for he went just blooey after he said that word " coffin."

He didn't speak again until we were pacing up and down the platform, waiting for the express.

" Get this," he groaned, suddenly grabbing my arm. " I never said or did anything to another man's wife that I could have resented having anybody say to Helen. I made 'em laugh. I jollied 'em a little—told 'em how sweet they looked, and how they owed it to their poor, tired husbands to keep on being inspirations to 'em. Women like that sort of thing. They eat it up. They're starved for it. We get so damned careless, we husbands. Gad, it wasn't until I knew that Helen only had a Chinaman's chance that I knew how much I loved her. I don't know why an angel like Helen would marry a dolt like me, but the fact that she had done so put it up to me to square things any way I could. Gad, I've made a muddle of it—but I didn't know what to do!"

I got to Elsie's mother's house before breakfast. Elsie was still asleep, with her fuzzy hair blown across the pillow like a kid's. When she opened her eyes, and saw me on my knees beside the bed, why, I began to babble the same disjointed kind of talk that Edgie had.

" I don't know why an angel like you would marry a dolt like me! Gad, I've made a muddle of things—I don't know why I've made such a muddle!"

She cuddled her head against my shoulder. I could feel her tears, but somehow she managed to get that laugh into her voice.

" I guess it was for the oldest reason in the world, Jerry," she whispered. " I guess it was for the same kind of reason that poor old Edgie had to pretend that he was a *Lothario!*"

Beauty Under a Bushel

PROVING ONCE MORE THAT THE FEMALE OF THE SPECIES IS MORE DEADLY THAN THE MALE

By Pauline K. Angell

"BUT the most difficult man of all," said Belinda, lifting the top of her rouge pot, and daintily emphasizing the effect of her high cheek bones with an expert touch of tangerine, " the most difficult and the absolute ace of all is Derry Dorrance. Rick says—"

She paused, pawed around in the open drawer, brought out a lip stick, and with nice deliberation pointed up curves which nature had carelessly left unfinished.

" Rick says—"

She leaned back, studied the effect of her artistry through narrowed eyes, picked up a soft towel, and wiped her mouth clean again.

" Oh, Belinda!" objected Sue, tenderly touching her lashes with mascara. " You had it just right!"

" Nope—too dark. Takes a lighter shade to go just right with tangerine. I always forget."

" Tangerine?" Peg laughed. " Listen, Bel—I'm only a simple country girl, and up to date I have used nothing but plain rouge. If I send you a stamped and self-addressed envelope, will you tell me how you get that way? Toss me the tweezers, will you? My eyebrows are a sight!"

Maude stretched lazily, to show how lightly she wore her superior sophistication.

" Personally I prefer geranium," she remarked, carefully patting her mud mask. " Paris is mad about it."

" Geranium's all right in the daytime. Wouldn't think of using it at night." Belinda waited to make sure that they rang up her score. " As I was saying, Rick says—"

But by this time she had the light lip stick.

It was altogether too much for Rosemary, curled on the foot of the bed, and watching the parade of technique with the detached curiosity of a monkey. She giggled.

" Great aunt! Completely forgot who was present!"

Belinda closely studied the movement of her lips as she spoke.

" Run along, pup! This is not a children's party."

Rosemary uncurled herself slowly and sauntered across the room.

" Don't think I mind—*wimmin!*"

The last word spurted out, a jet of scorn sheathed in laughter. Rosemary closed the door with superior care, then opened it again, and stuck a mocking face back into the room.

" Rick says—do pardon me, but Rick says—do I interrupt? Rick says"—she raised her voice to drown out Belinda's exasperation—" that Derry Dorrance is a universal encyclopedia on the subject of—wimmin. Keeps a card catalogue of their wiles. So don't bore him with any of your amateur allure. Rick's phrase, so pardon me. Also says he doesn't like 'em pretty; says nature's motives are too obvious. Derry's phrase, so pardon me once more." And *rat-a-tat-tat* down the hall went her derisive heels.

" Pup," said Frederick Ross, Sr., as Rosemary emphasized her arrival on the landing, " you are probably the noisiest terrier that ever tore a shoe to pieces."

" Pop," said Rosemary, taking the rest of the stairs more sedately, " I've decided to grow into a police dog and protect this household."

" Nice doggy!" He ran his fingers through her short curls. " What's bothering us now?"

" It's the wimmin, pop, the wimmin—Belinda and her lady friends. They're upstairs in Belinda's room making perfect asses of themselves!"

"But we've managed to come safely through several years of that."

"Oh, yes, milord and master!" Rosemary hooked her arm through her father's and walked him out on the veranda. "But this time it's to the death. They're taking all their looks out of the safe, every one of 'em, real and paste, and spreading 'em all over the place. With Rick bringing a bunch of boys home for a week—well, I call it risky, radically risky!"

"And what, if one may express curiosity, are you going to do about it?"

"I think," said Rosemary, "that my plan of campaign will be to set my good sharp teeth in the desirable Derry and hold on till help comes."

Now Derry Dorrance was indeed a very charming young man. The more women told him so, the more charming he became. He charmed and charmed. Underneath, too, he was awfully nice—serious and earnest and all that, with theories about life and everything.

Mrs. Ross had a properly friendly greeting for each of Rick's friends—Pete Foster, star comedian in the college shows, and Dusty Miller, well known to readers of the sporting page; but Derry she kissed, just as she kissed Rick. There was something about him, as he bent toward her, so confidently expectant of affection that it was just the most natural thing in the world to do.

That was what made Derry difficult. He wanted affection from everybody, and everybody gave it to him. It was absolutely impossible, as Belinda had explained earlier in the afternoon, to keep the front seat.

Maude, of course, realized that she herself had a something which was irresistible. She kept realizing it constantly as she dressed for the evening—a little hastily, measured by her usual performance, for she wanted to stroll nonchalantly in the garden before dinner. You never could tell what might happen if you gave opportunity a chance.

Sure enough, opportunity did appreciate the chance. Derry joined her as promptly as if they had been in a story.

"I'll just fall into step beside you," he said.

The casual ease of his opening, and its significance, were not lost upon Maude.

"Do," she said, "but you'll probably find me a trifle *distraite*." Her tone was unmistakably world-weary. "This beauty of lilac and wistaria is terrible to me—too terrible!"

Her sigh hinted of a past bravely lived down. Obediently Derry became all tenderness and solicitude.

"Yes—there is something damaging about it. But of course"—this after a moment of silence, during which she had been subject to careful inspection, and had enjoyed it—"it doesn't damage you in the least."

Maude smiled still world-wearily and patted her hair.

"Oh, yes—this permanent wave is damp proof."

But Derry did not follow as per schedule.

"Never can understand why make-up is so darned attractive," he said.

"Is it?" murmured Maude.

"Of course, the girl makes some difference," said Derry, bestowing upon her arm the appropriate pressure.

Maude kept her slightly beaded lashes sweeping a cheek flushed with geranium, and toyed daintily with her necklace, so that her slender, pink-tipped fingers also came prominently into the picture. Conscious of his eyes relentlessly drinking in every detail, and satisfied that the image he would carry away with him would be all that could be desired, she waited for his next remark.

"Yes," said Derry. "I'm modern about these things. You see, it's like this—take a painting that looks like a mere daub. Give it a proper frame, proper light, and all of a sudden you see that it is a real painting. Girl's the same. Take a girl, naturally a mere daub—"

"I beg your pardon!" Maude was already speaking over her shoulder. "I've a date with Rick."

She floated with elaborate disdain up the path at the end of which the junior Ross had just appeared.

"Oh, hell!" sighed Derry. "Always so careless when I first break into the boudoir! Throw great bunches of truth around—break up all the furniture—"

A voice interrupted his self-reproach.

"You ought," said Rosemary, appearing at his elbow with surprising suddenness, "to stay in the man-made world."

"Hello!" said Derry.

"But now you're here," Rosemary ended

rather lamely under his steady stare, " you might as well come in to dinner."

II

It was generally understood that a house party at the Rosses' would be old-fashioned, but not slow. There would be little or no hooch, but a fine assortment of horses and girls, all thoroughbreds. There would be no scorching off to road houses or smart country clubs, but there were miles of bridle paths wandering through the estate. There were two tennis courts at the bottom of the garden, and, somewhere near, a little lake buried in a remnant of ragged woodland. And there would be nothing in the very least old-fashioned about the informal dances every evening.

" All neckers," commented Rosemary, as she dutifully put in a new record. " Nothing new whatever—*whatever,*" she repeated, with an emphasis which meant that she was trying to cover a slight attack of envy with an assumption of boredom.

It was all very well to boast that she would carry off the desirable Derry, but performance would be quite another matter, she decided, as she watched him dancing a very confidential with Belinda. She tried her best not to look like a fixture, and succeeded—at least, so Derry thought—in looking for all the world like a good little girl who's been let come down from the nursery, but who's not finding the part quite enough fun to keep her awake.

At just about this point the husky Dusty cut in on Belinda. Derry strode across the room to see if he couldn't cheer the little thing up a bit.

" Aren't you having a good time?" he asked.

" No," said Rosemary, rising to the moment as easily as nature intended. " Guess I'll go swimming."

" On!" said Derry. " How soon do we start?"

She outlined her campaign with the swift decision of a general.

" Five minutes. Meet you in the garden. Use the back stairs."

She flashed out of the room.

Giggling softly to herself, she shed her silk party clothes and slipped into her one-piece bathing suit. Then, pulling a knitted cape around her, she stole stealthily out through the kitchen and into the garden.

Untroubled by the terrible beauty of lilac and wistaria, she sped down the path, her gay cape a flying signal to the young man racing behind her. Past the tennis courts, through the orchard, into the wood, and along the edge of the lake they sprinted side by side; then out upon a rocky point.

Continuing the movement with which she had thrown off her cape, Rosemary dived. She came up with a joyous snort and struck off across the cove. Derry followed, and side by side they lifted themselves through the water, conscious only of a breathless exhilaration.

Presently Rosemary pushed her way under a low-hanging beech, and pulled herself into the branches.

" Awfully good place for petting," she said; " but don't pet."

" Why not?"

" Oh, I don't know. Savages don't."

" Feel savage?"

" Fairly."

" Sure of your anthropology?"

" Absolutely."

" That settles it. Don't like to pet, anyway. You wouldn't believe it, perhaps, but I haven't much use for girls."

" Don't see why you should. Think they're rather awful myself."

" You see, it's like this." He crossed one knee over the other, and Rosemary recognized that a declamation was under way. " Girls presume on the biological factor. They think they ought to be supported in luxury for trimming up a tropism and garnishing a gland."

" I know a lot of long words, too," admitted Rosemary.

" What I mean "—Derry kicked his foot emphatically through the water—" is that I'm old-fashioned about these things. I think girls should hide their beauty under a bushel. These arts of the boudoir are an affront to masculinity."

" Such base ingratitude!" murmured Rosemary.

" Well, you see it's like this—a man likes to hunt, and he doesn't want to have the game waiting for him on the doorstep, all dolled up with signs inviting him to shoot. Looks aren't important, anyway. It's brains and personality that count, same as with men. This decorating a vacant lot is futile, absolutely futile."

" Absolutely?" Rosemary laughed and slipped into the water. " Come on, let's be modern. Back to the jazz!" she said.

" All right," said Derry mournfully. " Down goes the curtain on reality."

"Was this real?"

Rosemary's stroke was slow and quiet.

"Yes. No need to lie to you. You can see that right off. You're still a kid. They haven't spoiled you yet."

"Oh, yes! Completely forgot my youth. Such a handicap!"

"Huh!" said Derry. "What kind of a kid are you, anyway?"

"Haven't picked my line yet," said Rosemary. "Guess I'll beat you to the point."

When, dripping and breathless, they stood on the path again, Derry looked at her thoughtfully and said:

"Guess you'd better give me the rest of your dances."

"Thanks, but I'm much too sleepy."

"You can't leave the party flat," objected Derry.

"Think I could stay awake for one," admitted Rosemary.

III

BELINDA was outraged.

"I think it's highly improper, to say the *least,* mother. A good solid hour and a half, and no one saw anything of either of them; and now look at them! Dance after dance, as if there was no one else in the room! She's much too young, and he's a very experienced young man."

Mrs. Ross sighed.

"I know, dear; but I really can't do anything about it. I'm sure a friend of Rick's—"

"Well, as a parent, I call you a first-class peanut vendor!"

"Yes, I know." Belinda's mother sighed again. "I gave up being a parent long ago; but no doubt you can manage, dear."

She smiled not too obtrusively, and Belinda moved haughtily away. Indeed she could manage!

"Maude," she said presently, slipping her arm through that of her alleged friend, "what's your kid sister doing?"

Maude smiled in a way which was a little too knowing to be altogether comfortable.

"I see you have a little strike-breaker in your home," she purred.

"If your hearing were as good as your eyesight," retorted Belinda, "you'd catch the opening bars of 'Here Come the Chaperons.' Mother is threatening to let loose a whole flock of them because the pup's gone goofy."

"Get you perfectly, Bel, and don't a bit mind helping you out."

Maude's graciousness was that shade too gracious which is hardest to bear. Belinda marked it down against her for attention later. First she would get this other thing out of the way.

"What I thought, Cecily might invite the pup over."

"Delighted to arrange it, darling. Cecily's been making the air a rich indigo because she's too young for parlor hounds and house parties. They can sulk together. Dad's got a couple of new hunters. That 'll be bait for the pup."

"Settled!" said Belinda. "I tell you, when I'm a parent, there'll be some snap to the performance!"

IV

ROSEMARY came down the next morning looking as demure and dewy-eyed as became a favorite of fortune, and feeling much as any girl would feel who, single-handed, had snatched the prize from a field of ardent competitors.

But there were several things for which she was not at all prepared, and one of them was the tableau which presented itself as she turned into the library—Belinda, wickedly simple in black, with the primmest of white collars and cuffs, importantly holding her place in a book and nodding sagely to Derry, who was pouring forth a torrent of excited conversation. The sight of Belinda with a book was enough in itself to arouse grave suspicion. Moreover, there was no color in her face, and just a suggestion of shadow under her eyes.

"Highbrow stuff," muttered Rosemary. "Last night the varnished vamp, to-day the simple stude!"

She strolled over and leaned on the back of the couch, facing Derry above Belinda. Alas, it was painfully evident that she was just one more added to his audience! The torrent of words poured on.

And then occurred a fatality. Rosemary's eyes fell on Belinda's book. The irrelevance of her giggle checked Derry in mid career; and Rosemary was quite old enough to know that when a young man is earnestly expounding, a frivolous interruption rules you out for quite a number of rounds, at any rate.

She made the best exit possible under the circumstances, and her tension was considerably relieved by finding Mr. Ross alone on the veranda. He promptly became the recipient of her excuses.

"And if you'll tell me how in the world I could help it, pop? Bel can't even understand the flyleaf, and here she was *so* solemn, and here he was *so* wise! 'I suppose you're too young for psychoanalysis,' he said; so I put on my most distant air, and remarked, 'Oh, yes! Can't understand how my name comes to be written inside the cover of such a book—really shocking!' And I walked away."

Her father smiled.

"Thinking you'd proved the family plate to be nothing but a cheap imitation, and not worth the trouble of carting off? "Good, faithful doggy!" He patted her head. "But remember, the better the watchdog, the greater the danger that he will be fed a nice juicy piece of poisoned meat."

"Huh! Don't fret! Haven't spent my life with the wimmin for nothing! I know perfectly well that by this time Bel has covered up my giggle with something or other."

And indeed Belinda had. In fact, she had covered it with a counterattack of undeniable cleverness.

"The pup is just goofy about the man who gives her these books. Fearfully flattered to find any of the rest of us reading them. It's the rector. Has an awful case on the kid. Always giving her books away over her head, which she dutifully reads. The family consider it practically settled."

"Awfully young, isn't she?" Derry inquired, in a tone of disapproval.

"Well, yes, in a way. Serious-minded, though."

With which damning remark Belinda withdrew, to turn her attention to another quarter of the field.

"You see," she said to Rosemary, with that restrained superiority which older sisters assume with maddening perfection, "you're too young and inexperienced to realize it, of course, but Derry Dorrance just ruined his evening because you sat around looking like a dumb bunny, and there's no use your hanging on his lapel as if you'd knocked him cold. You'll only make a fool of yourself."

At this point the smooth and refined tone of Belinda's rebuke was interrupted by another of Rosemary's irrelevant giggles.

"Jealousy in a coat of many colors!" she scoffed.

It was enough to scorch the finish off the manner of almost any lady.

"You poor little half baked summer squash! Thought you were a regular jazz baby, did you? Huh! Your shining red nose alone is enough to flag the Twentieth Century Limited. Go ahead—make yourself ridiculous! I don't care!"

But nevertheless Belinda cared enough to listen quite intently to Rosemary's end of a telephone conversation, which went something like this:

"Awfully nice of you, Cecily!

"Really?

"Oh, no, not this week, not possibly. Make it next.

"Well, you don't kill off your horses every week, do you?

"Listen! Exactly one week from today, at 11 A.M., I'll drop my bag in your front hall. All right?"

And so there was nothing for Belinda to do but to set her teeth and let nature take her course—which, after all, was not such a bad thing to do. For although Rosemary, that evening, dutifully changing records as an excuse for being present, looked quite as much like a wistful and demure child as on the evening before, Derry was oblivious to her presence. So, also, was everybody else.

A horrible suspicion began to grow in her mind that Belinda was right. Derry had just taken pity on her. It was a terribly humiliating reflection. In fact, she could not endure to sit on the sidelines another minute.

She slipped away into the library. Some good old fairy stories that always turn out right would just about suit the occasion, she decided.

She curled up on a low window seat with a closely shaded lamp adjusted so that its illumination was confined to the pages of her book; but alas for Rosemary's peace of mind! Presently that eager and thrillingly earnest voice of Derry's was turned on just outside the window.

"Well, you see, it's like this," he was saying. "I'm pretty primitive about these things. Fragrance in a girl's hair always gets me. I don't care if it did come out of a bottle from the corner drug store. It always seems to me—"

"This," lied Sue, in a voice low with romantic import, "was given me by a gypsy."

"Ah!" sighed Derry. "I knew there was a something about it—something wild and primitive, primitive as the perfumes that Javanese women use. After all, it's these primitive women who understand the art of the chase. Of course, the conventional idea is that it's the men who like to hunt. As a matter of fact, we're too busy. In reality it's the women—"

Rosemary didn't hear any more, for the very good reason that she dug her fingers hard into both ears and looked at the pages of her book with such tense determination that it made her whole body rigid. It wasn't until some minutes later, when some one touched her on the arm, that she let her hands fall into her lap and realized that she was aching in every muscle. She realized, too, that it was the facile Derry himself who was peering at her through the dim light.

"Wondered what had become of you," he said. "What's this—one of the tomes presented by the rector?" He bent over her shoulder. "Ho! Good old Grimm! What would the rector say to such a fall from grace?"

"The who?"

"The earnest young clergyman who superintends your reading."

Suddenly she understood. It was unusually clever of Bel.

"You see," Derry went on, "your sister told me all about your serious affair."

He smiled condescendingly—oh, very condescendingly! That condescending smile cut deeper than Belinda's perfidy—deeper even than Derry's own. With one deft stroke Rosemary cut him out of her life forever.

"Oh, ye-es!" she drawled, accepting her rôle with an indifference as superb as his smile had been condescending. "He gave me Grimm, too. Elementary lessons in the higher malice. He says that familiarity with the unscrupulous is probably the most important element in a girl's education. But I will not bore you with a lecture by my fiancé. I was just going out to have a smoke with pop. Good night!"

By the time she had found her father, however, she was nothing but a somewhat forlorn little girl.

"Guess I got a taste of that poisoned meat, pop," she said. "Think I'll go over to Cecily's and recupe. Bel's provided me with an invitation, and I might as well accept with becoming gullibility. Have accepted, as a matter of fact. Cecily expects me in half an hour. Take me over in the chummy?"

"What, put my watchdog out of the way?"

"Listen, pop! I've faced the facts. In this crowd I'm a dud, a dumbdora, a wallflower. If I hang around one hour longer, I'll be named for life. Besides, you don't need a watchdog. I've discovered that the thief isn't a real thief at all. He's just practicing!"

V

Rosemary's retreat made not even a ripple on the smooth surface of the house party, unless you count the little wave of relief that swept Belinda when she heard of it. That really might be counted, for three persons noticed it, and all three spoke of it in ways which were more or less insinuating, while they prepared for the night in Belinda's room.

As a matter of fact, they were all a little relieved to have Rosemary out of the way. You feel a whole lot easier going through the rigorous rites of producing an irresistible skin when you are sure the coast is clear of barbarians who are not above scratching.

"You use a cream that's perfectly blaah, Bel!" Peg helped herself liberally out of the jar on the dressing table, and opened the attack on her features by daubing chin, nose, and forehead. "See you're clearing the floor for a solitary with the Derry. Personally I've marked Pete for mine, so let him alone!"

"Help yourself." Belinda continued airily to rub night cream into her face with the correct circular motion. "All the cream you want—also all the Pete."

Sue, briskly rubbing a fragrant tonic into her scalp, smiled under cover of her hair at a secret she had from the too confident Belinda.

"Advise you not to be too generous with the other goofs, Bel, till you've hooked the Derry!"

From the bathroom came an incessant slap, slap, slap, as Maude gave each eye fifty spats of cold water. Presently she plunged her face into a towel, and then began a careful patting, which at length permitted her to take part in the conversation.

"What's the idea making such a fuss about this Derry? Personally I wouldn't turn the house upside down to fence him in. If you ask me, I'll tell the world his tempo's rotten, and he's awfully *gauche.*"

"Isn't it pretty late at night"—Belinda's tone was smooth as glass — " to be practicing your French? See if you can understand this sentence in nice plain English: ' He must have given her the air.' *Comprenez vous?*"

It was two days later that Derry, coming up from the tennis courts to keep a tea engagement with Mrs. Ross — that's the kind of young man he was—found that lady already royally entertained by a robust old man who was enjoying his cakes and his conversation with equal gusto.

" Why, this younger generation—" the veteran was saying. " Excuse me, sir," he broke off, with a nod to Derry, " but we must just finish this."

" Can't be done!" muttered Derry. " If it had been possible to finish the younger generation, it would have been dead before now!"

" Now, there you have it—no respect for age, or the cloth, or anything else!" His eyes twinkled at Derry. " Of course, young man, you realize that you've killed the conversation. I really haven't the temerity to continue with a subject after I've been told to my teeth it's been all but done to death. Quite right! You prove my point. They may lack respect, Mrs. Ross, but they won't stand for rubbish! Well, my regards to Miss Rosemary, and here's the book I promised her."

Depositing a somewhat heavy volume on the tea table, he made courtly adieus, during which Derry discovered, with something of a shock, that the book was a well thumbed Rabelais.

" Who's the jolly old Santa Claus?" he asked, as Mrs. Ross poured fresh tea.

" I should have mentioned it, of course—he's our rector."

Now even a member of the younger generation is not supposed to spill tea on the carpet; but Derry did just that, and then stooped and sopped it up without even an apology. His face got very red, as indeed it might well do, though all he said was:

" How far is it to Maude's house?"

Though Mrs. Ross was somewhat bewildered, she took it calmly enough, and informed him that it was about five miles. Thereupon Derry excused himself and went to the telephone.

When he came back, he was once more all that a charming young man should be; for in the course of a brief conversation, during which Derry remarked that he had just had the pleasure of meeting the rector, Rosemary had concluded that at about seven o'clock the next morning she might possibly be found riding in the Boundary Lane.

About half past six o'clock the next morning a blithe and brisk young man might have been seen crossing the garden toward the stables. He was seen, in fact, for an equally enterprising young lady was there before him, already mounted, but detained by a conversation with the groom, which permitted her to keep one eye on the house. It was, of course, Belinda.

She greeted Derry with serene surprise—serene, because she had heard from the groom, on the previous evening, that Mr. Dorrance had ordered a horse for half past six; surprise, because that was undoubtedly what the situation demanded, if it was to be carried off successfully—and Belinda was accustomed to success.

They rode off together, because Derry couldn't see any way out of it. They rode toward the Boundary Lane, because that was the direction in which he had been riding ever since yesterday afternoon. Hence it was that Rosemary, pausing for a moment at the top of the High Meadow, saw something which was altogether contrary to her idea of a tryst.

" Fooled again, you dumb-bell!" she muttered, as she backed the Demon into the shelter of the thick shrubbery.

She gave herself up to miserable meditation long enough to permit the couple to pass. Then she gave the Demon his head across the meadow. He stretched himself out with all the power that was in him, took a couple of fences several inches higher than was necessary, and found himself faced with the long reach of the Wet Meadow.

Rosemary continued to ride as a matter of habit, curiously numb and blind to her surroundings. It was the Demon's determined gathering of speed that roused her to the fact that they were bearing down upon a hedge high enough to seem a special challenge to her mount.

" No, you don't, Demon!"

She pulled in with all her might, and, gallant little horsewoman that she was, succeeded in turning just in time to avoid the jump. She leaned forward and patted the Demon's neck comfortingly.

" It looks just like any other hedge, I

know, and you'd take it like a bird, but on the other side, dummy, you'd land in a nice, mushy bog, and what would happen to us then is best left to the movies!"

She turned him back toward the road. Halfway there, the wave of pensiveness again swept over her, and she slipped off, threw the bridle over a post, and flung herself face downward upon the fragrant ground. It was her surest way of finding consolation.

Presently the little things growing among the roots of the grasses claimed her attention—a strawberry plant with eight drops of dew poised on the points of each curling leaf; sorrel, three hearts on a stem—"Too many for comfort!" sighed Rosemary—and some busy little bugs, brown and red and green. To think that in this world of wonders were nice, strong men who minced around after wimmin — stupid, artificial wimmin! A bug would have more sense.

"Probably, though," she remarked at last to the surrounding atmosphere, "I haven't got the sense of a ladybug myself. Don't understand the game of my own species. Suppose I'd better grow up!"

She kicked her heels high in the air, and, turning her head, looked sidewise through the waving grass. She saw a scattering of buttercups and tight little daisy buds, and the ragged hedge that marked the road all sprayed over with blackberry blossom. Suddenly saw something else, too—something which brought her to her feet taut for action; but of this in a minute.

Belinda, in the meantime, had drawn rein in a sufficiently secluded spot. When Derry looked at her inquiringly, she gave him one of her most successful smiles. Then she leaned over and stroked his arm.

"Nice man, nice big man," she said, "to give all my guests a rush! My guests thank you, and I thank you, but from now on"—her hand slipped down and covered his—"I wouldn't object to a little more concentration!"

Derry looked at her and smiled—a thing that he, too, did intimately and with no difficulty whatever.

"Might not be a bad idea," he said, easing the situation along. "You see it's like this—"

But in reality he didn't see much of anything himself, except that a little cloud of black flies was giving his mount a rush which the beast did not enjoy. One specially persistent pest picked a spot about three inches above Bonfire's nostril, and Derry knew he ought to interfere, but there was his hand firmly covered by Belinda's. It was a dilemma indeed, and one which, alas, the horse did not appreciate. What he did appreciate was the fact that the bridle rein was slacker than usual.

Suddenly down went a tortured nose and up went a determined forefoot. Bonfire gave a successful swipe at the spot where the fly had done its worst, but on the down grade his foot caught in the bridle, which parted with a sickening snap.

Why Derry kept his seat at all, that first wild minute, he never understood. He managed to do all the things a novice would do to convey to the animal that something was wrong. He wrapped his hands in the horse's mane and dug in with his knees.

As Bonfire sprang, Derry hoped he was right in thinking that the maddened beast would make for the stables; but he was wrong. The horse dashed straight across the lane, and went sweeping through the meadows in a wholly irresponsible humor. The only reason why he didn't take the first hedge they came to was because there happened to be a gap straight in front of him; but Derry saw with dismay that he was making toward a second hedge, which appeared to be much higher, and in which no gap was visible.

He gripped the animal's mane tighter, and took a firmer hold with his knees. This was the language of panic—also, unfortunately, an idiom which Bonfire had been taught to interpret in quite a different manner. The horse was going at the dangerous jump in good earnest.

This was perfectly apparent to Rosemary as she swung into her saddle and wheeled the Demon almost before she had her seat. Urging him hotly along the high hedge, she saw, with relief, that sight of them had made Bonfire turn slightly in his course. Digging in her spurs, she forced the Demon ahead till, with a final cut, he ran in and shouldered off his quivering brother.

Both horses slowed under the impact, and Rosemary gave a little gasp as she saw Bonfire's swinging bridle. Reaching out swiftly, she grabbed Derry's horse by the forelock and brought him to a halt.

"Thanks!" panted Derry, sliding to the ground. "How did you know my bridle broke?"

" Didn't. Thought you were riding to take that hedge. Nobody does. There's a bog behind it."

" Then," said Derry, his eyes dilating slightly, " I owe you double thanks, as well as an apology."

" Nothing of the sort! Don't like to be in at the death—that's all."

" No—listen!" Derry looked very appealing. " You've saved me from a beastly fall, maybe worse." His voice went a bit husky. " I want to tell you how it was."

Rosemary turned her face resolutely away, and saw Belinda cantering in at the far corner of the field.

" You needn't explain. See!" she said, pointing. " Permit me to return you to your escort as innocent and pure as when you were torn from her side."

And, bowing low with a gallant sweep of her hat, she swung the Demon about and loped away.

VI

Rosemary caught the train to town which her father usually took; but since Mr. Ross rode in the club car, he remained ignorant of this important fact until he was unceremoniously seized as he walked briskly through the concourse.

" Pop," said Rosemary, her eyes big with excitement, " if Racine Frères phone to inquire if it's all right for a young lady to charge goods to your name, you'll say it is, won't you?"

" Sounds rather dangerous!"

" Well, to be perfectly frank, I'm not going to let you down so awful easy. But listen—how'd you like to see a bee-utiful and sophisticated lady, hitherto unknown, walk in on the farewell dance to-morrow night?"

Her father chuckled.

" Go to it!" he said.

" Ah!" sighed Rosemary. " The spell is broken. To-morrow I emerge. Only listen—one thing more. I wouldn't mind if you tucked about fifty in cash into my dainty fist."

And this, too, her obliging parent proceeded to do; whereupon his daughter dashed away about her business.

First to Racine Frères, where it was suggested that " *mademoiselle* would like something of a simplicity and *très jeune fille.*"

" No — something subtle and about thirty," replied Rosemary, with just a touch of condescension in her smile.

Unmoved, she appraised the procession of models in flame and jade and mauve. A creation of silver over a clever weaving of orange and green held her for a moment; but in the end she recognized her gown unhesitatingly — a gossamer of gold embroidered on fine black net.

Next to a *salon de beauté,* where she was steamed and frozen, pinched and stroked, and given a colorful finish, to the accompaniment of French patter served half and half.

" I think," she objected critically, " it is a little too healthy."

" But how it suits *mademoiselle! Quel fraicheur!*"

" It would be better, though, if it looked about thirty."

For the life of her she couldn't speak of that face as if it were her own.

" If it pleases *mademoiselle. Voilà! C'est charmant!*"

" That will do," said Rosemary. " Now give me all the makings, please."

That night she practiced her newly acquired art on Cecily, and got a highly satisfactory result.

" Only I think," she said, eying her work critically, " they leave you too smooth. There's something lacking in my face, and there's something lacking in yours." She studied herself for a moment. " It's tame. There's nothing unexpected. It's all alike. I know—here!"

She took the pencil, made two little strokes, then turned to Cecily.

" Right?"

" Right! Dead right!" agreed Cecily solemnly.

Rosemary laughed and went to bed.

Next morning she called her brother on the telephone.

" Ricky, there's a stunning girl here wants to come to the dance to-night."

" Huh! Kid, isn't she?"

" Not! She's got a shellacked face and a regular Theda dress. Cost one hundred and fifty berries. Ask dad—he knows."

" Pop in on this? Mark it O. K., then. Think it's a darned shame you were shucked off, anyway."

VII

The evening was well under way when Belinda, coming in from the garden with Derry, noted with some dismay that her party had developed a decided weakness in the distributing department. Most of the male guests, in fact, had grouped themselves around a window giving on the veranda, and were conducting themselves with that measure of hilarity which survives the small boy's impulse to show off before his girl.

Mindful of her duties as hostess, she moved closer. She drew in a sharp breath as the group parted, and, after a moment of startled bewilderment, she recognized Rosemary in the center of it. She made a quick recovery, however, and arched haughty brows.

"Look who's here!" she said. "What's the idea?"

Rosemary threw back her head and gave it to her straight.

"I've just been made president of the Arts and Crafts Club," she drawled. "Pitiless publicity for every particle of pulchritude is the password. Advance, and give me the grip!"

She held out her hand, but Belinda only gave a short laugh.

"The child is feverish," she said, and passed on.

With secret delight she noted how Rosemary's face fell a little as Derry, contenting himself with a brief nod, continued to stick closer than a brother. It appeased her wrath considerably to see that he pursued the suggested policy of concentration with admirable form, and took no part in the rush the other men were giving that crazy kid.

There was no doubt that Rosemary had put herself over. The big brothers of boys and girls she had always known cut in on her as eagerly as if they had never seen her before.

And, in a way, they hadn't seen her before. If you begin to take notice of fresh-faced small fry, you're likely to get into all sorts of messes. Rosemary in dimity, with a face that was nothing but washed, might do almost anything—or, again, she might not; but as soon as she put on the regalia, you knew she understood the rules.

When a girl is an adept with the powder puff and the lip stick, you can be pretty sure in a general way what will be coming down the road all the time. The young men rushed her in joyous security. Even the foreigners, Dusty and Pete, protested because she had given them the absent treatment, and got at least a foothold in every other dance.

Rosemary laughed and glittered through it all and doggedly saved the eighth dance for Derry. A sort of internal shivering, which had first attacked her when Derry joined Belinda in scorning her little court, got worse and worse, and when the eighth dance came she really had to do something about it. She had told every one that the dance was taken. Disappearance was her best cue.

The lawn, the garden, and the veranda would be all cluttered up with petters. The kitchen garden would be safe, however; so she stole out and sat on the bench by the bird bath, and thought quite bitterly about life and young men.

Nevertheless, she was not surprised to hear Derry say:

"Hello!"

Somehow she had known, quite deep within herself, that he would be watching, and would follow; and yet she wouldn't have been surprised, either, if his indifference had continued forever and forever and forever. It was these two certainties fighting for position which had produced her internal pangs.

She let one moment go by while she enjoyed the sensation of getting back to normal.

"How'd they let you get away?"

"How'd you get away yourself?"

"Oh, I bolted. Had to. Damn it, you've broken my heart!"

"Huh!" said Rosemary. "I'd like to know how you make that out."

"Well, you see it's like this—I thought you were different. You know what I said once about girls hiding their beauty under a bushel."

Rosemary giggled.

"I remember. You know an awful lot of long words. Listen—under a bushel is right where my beauty's been to date, and I suppose it would have gone moldy there if I hadn't got busy and put on a little protective coloration. I've known that crowd in there all my life, but to-night is absolutely the first time I've felt the need of a traffic cop."

"Well, personally, when I see a girl get her guns out, the game is up as far as I'm concerned."

"Fragrance in a girl's hair always gets you, though," murmured Rosemary absently. "You're pretty primitive about these things. In reality, men are too busy to hunt. It's up to us women—"

"Huh!" grunted Derry, unperturbed. "That's just my line. Mustn't make the mistake of getting a fellow's line mixed up with his ideas. What I mean is — why, Rosemary!"

His voice broke. He fingered the mulberry leaves, playing for control, and did not speak.

"What is it, Derry?"

The question came soft and frightened out of the thrilling silence.

"Well!" He threw back his head, and crowded the expression of amused detachment back into his eyes. "You know now, for example, what I mean is—your eyebrows. They sort of droop at the end, you know, and then go slanting up a little. Gives you sort of a special look, humorous and elfin and distinctive. Well, what I mean is, that should be a secret for the man who loves you to discover." He stopped for a minute, and then went on: "It seems as if you've thrown a spotlight on something I thought I had discovered, and loved—mainly because you didn't know it was there."

"But, Derry"—Rosemary's eyes were on him in wide astonishment—"look!"

She dipped her handkerchief in the fountain, and swiftly wiped off the deft line of sophistication.

Derry looked. There was absolutely no denying it — Rosemary's brows were perfectly straight.

And then he did an astonishing thing—that is, it would have been astonishing in any one but Derry Dorrance. He took Rosemary's hands, wet handkerchief and all, and said:

"Don't you see, dear, it just proves that my theory's right? It's brains and personality that count, same as with men. Maybe I didn't know the shape of your eyebrows. It's because I was dazzled by the splendor of your spirit."

"Don't you think," Rosemary interrupted softly, "that you talk a good deal like a rector?"

"Damn it, yes! You're an uncompromising little devil. I adore you!"

And Rosemary, in the delicious strangeness of his arms, let it go at that.

THERE WAS A GIRL IN LESBOS

There was a girl in Lesbos;
In Troy there was a queen;
And oh, the years, and oh, the tears
That lie our lives between!

Now all that's left of Helen
To prove her fair renown
Is the old tale of how her pale
Face burned a city down.

And Sappho—what of Sappho?
Her broken songs a few;
And yet, and yet, can we forget
The love she set them to?

Be still, and let them slumber,
Dreaming a new caprice;
No kiss can make dead Paris wake,
Or launch a ship in Greece.

What gods are we to judge them,
Those two white ghosts in hell?
Beauty goes on when we are gone—
Ladies, I wish you well!

Leslie Nelson Jennings

Not-Afraid

A WESTERN STORY OF STRONG MEN AND STRENUOUS DAYS

By Dane Coolidge

Author of "The Desert Trail," "Lost Wagons," etc.

XXV

BILL DHUE had been hung in the presence of forty witnesses, and his body had been turned over to Ranchester; but, though the doctors and visiting officers had all reported him dead, half of Cheyenne firmly believed that he lived. His wonderful show of courage, as he stood on the trap awaiting the fatal drop, gave birth to the rumor that the hanging was a fake, and that he knew it. A false platform, it was said, had been built beneath the trapdoor; and when he fell through the trap his feet had landed on the platform, thus saving his neck from the rope.

Ranchester, however, knew that the sentence had been executed, and that he would never see Bill Dhue again. He followed his friend's body to the grave in somber silence, closing his ears to the words of the funeral service.

" I am the resurrection and the life," the clergyman read, and Ranchester gazed at him grimly.

Many things had come to pass, but of these the most unbelievable was that Bill had died a Christian. He had actually forgiven his enemies, taking their secrets to the grave with him when they had conspired to have him hung; but as Ranchester pondered on this, knowing his friend as he did, he shook his head at the thought.

No! Bill's religion had been the same as his own—fidelity to his friends. It was to protect Ranchester that he had spared his enemies, for they had all been involved together. If Dhue revealed the names of those who had hired him, the first would be that of Ranchester; but, rather than see the major accused, he had died unavenged—a true friend to the end.

Thoughts and memories rushed like a mill race through Ranchester's brain. He saw, as in a dream, his vast herd of cattle descending into Heminway's meadows, and the Preacher, big and burly, with sanctimonious jowl, standing out and calling to his God. He saw the thunderheads rushing up as Heminway prayed for God's lightning to reach down and strike Ranchester dead; and the pale face of a girl, looking out from the doorway, actually expecting the miracle to happen.

What a farce it had been, that drawing of the circle, like a necromancer of old! And how the Indians had stared, clapping their hands to their mouths as he stepped out and challenged the lightning!

A farce, yes, but a bitter farce now, for the prophecy of the Preacher had come true. Ranchester's friend had been hung in spite of all his efforts, and his own happiness had been destroyed. How much better it would have been if the lightning had killed him and saved him from this delirium of suffering!

But the Preacher—no! How could a man like that—self-seeking, arrogant, bombastic—have any influence with the Maker of earth and heaven? Grant the existence of a God—omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent—was it likely that He would answer the demands of this ranter?

Ranchester remembered his own mother, a woman whose every act had seemed to him just and good. If she had called on God, it was reasonable to suppose that her prayers might be answered; but this arrogant homesteader, settling down on Ranchester's range, fencing in his very round-up ground, and then, standing out with arms lifted to the sky, calling on God to strike him dead! Ranchester burst out

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laughing at the absurdity of it all—and then his eyes became set.

He saw again the rigid form, the black cap, the rope stretching down from the gallows. Bill Dhue had been hung. The Preacher had killed Bill with his prayers, and even now he was offering up thanks. He was thanking his God for His loving kindness and mercy, for breaking the arms of his enemies.

One enemy was left whose arms were not broken. He, Ranchester, would go back—he would repay. He would pay this loud-mouthed hypocrite for his evil intent, whether his prayers had been answered or not. And there was another in Thunder Basin who had turned her heart against him—he had promised to punish her, too!

Ranchester rose up purposefully, a new light in his eyes, and went out into the night. Here at last was the forgotten mission that his mind had been groping for, the vengeance he had put off so long. He would show them whether God alone can punish the human atoms that pass their brief span here on earth.

Let them pray again while he went to Afton Cunningham and bought up the mortgage on their homestead! When the mortgage came due, he would laugh in their faces and burn down their cabin before their eyes.

There was an ugly gleam in Cunningham's eyes as he peered out through the window, watching Ranchester as he rode up to the gate. What did he know, and what had he come for?

Since the day of the hanging—yes, since long before then—since the day when Ranchester wrote the check—Cunningham had avoided him, half in fear of his anger, and partly through fear that he would have to kill the major; for that would be inevitable if Ranchester discovered the treachery which had brought Bill Dhue to his death. He slipped a pistol under his waistband, where it would not be seen, and waited to get him in the door.

Ranchester came in quietly, without the look in his eye that the manager of the Seven D's had learned to know. When he saw that all was well, Cunningham invited him in to have a drink.

They drank, sitting in silence by the whisky-slopped table, with its relics of a night of revelry. As he waited for Ranchester to come to the point, Cunningham shuffled a deck of soiled cards. The gang had been there the night before, drinking and gambling, as usual. As Ranchester brushed off the table, Cunningham dealt him five cards, absently dealing himself the same number.

" No, I won't play," declined Ranchester. " I came on a matter of business—in connection with this homesteader, Heminway."

" Oh, Heminway!" said Cunningham, glancing at him shrewdly.

" I ascertained from the bank that that mortgage on his homestead had for some reason been transferred to you. It was for five hundred dollars; and I came to ask you, Afton, if you'd consider reselling it to me. The land, as you know, is well inside my range. In fact, it's on my old round-up ground. When the mortgage comes due, I'd like to take over the property and clear away all those obstructions."

" Including that Preacher!" suggested Cunningham.

" Including the Preacher. Now what's your price on it, Afton? And I'll appreciate the courtesy very much."

" Don't mention it," mocked Cunningham. " I'm hep to you, old horse! You want it to give to that girl."

" What girl?" demanded Ranchester, throwing up his head.

Cunningham leered at him slyly.

" You know!" he said. " But there'll be nothing doing—I've got a use for that mortgage myself."

" What do you mean?" inquired Ranchester. " Am I to understand, Cunningham, that you intend to come in on my range?"

" Well, not regularly," grinned Cunningham; " but I might cut out one heifer. She looks pretty good to me."

" Damn your innuendos!" burst out Ranchester, in a passion. " I trust I am still a gentleman. And if you intend your remarks to refer to the daughter of this homesteader—"

" I do!" nodded Cunningham meaningly. " It's all right, old man, and the acting is good; but I happen to be next—understand? I know the place and the hour—and here's the thirty dollars that you slipped her. She paid the interest on that mortgage the next day."

He drew out three ten-dollar bills and laid them on the table. Ranchester stared at him blankly.

" What the devil are you talking about?" he asked.

"I'm talking about that girl!" answered Cunningham, raising his voice, and beginning to shake a threatening finger. "You can't come this over me, so there's no use pretending. I know a good thing myself; but since you ask me what I mean, we'll call a spade a spade. I mean you met this sagebrush beauty in that gulch up above your ranch, and the next day she came down here with three ten-dollar bills to pay off the interest on that mortgage. Now you want the mortgage itself; but lemme tell you, you'll never get it! I'm in on this myself—understand?"

"Yes, I do," returned Ranchester; "but let me inform you, Mr. Cunningham, that I'm not quite as low as you think. I gave the girl *forty* dollars, but it was the bounty on four wolf cubs that she'd just crawled into a den and killed. Since you've brought up the subject, I'm not in the habit of attempting to corrupt young girls—nor of having my word doubted, either!"

He rose as he spoke. Seeing the gleam in his eyes, Cunningham hastened to make amends.

"Oh, well!" he laughed. "Don't get me wrong, Ranchester. I didn't mean to doubt your word; but you've got to admit it looked black as hell against you. One of the boys was out scouting, and saw her. Now sit down and have a drink, and let's talk this matter over. I know you're a deep dog, Ranchester. Cover it up as you will, I can see as well as the rest of them, and I know you've got your eye on that girl. Well, so have I; and if it wasn't for you, I believe I could make a winning. But I tell you what I'll do, just to show that there's no hard feeling, and that I'm a dead game sport, even in love—we'll play a game of poker, my mortgage against your interest in the girl."

"Damn your mortgage!" burst out Ranchester, striking the table with his fist. "You've been drinking, or I wouldn't let this pass. Get this into your head before I have to knock it in—the girl is perfectly innocent. Furthermore, Cunningham, I know you've got a low mind, but don't judge others by yourself!"

"What do you mean?" blustered Cunningham angrily.

"I mean," exploded Ranchester, "that you're a low-bred, dissolute cur; and if I ever hear of you linking her name with mine again, you'll have to answer to me personally!"

He stood up, stern and erect, and the light of battle leaped like a flaming sword from his eyes. When Cunningham hesitated, Ranchester advanced a step toward him, and tapped him sharply on the shoulder.

"Cunningham," he said, "I've tried to be friends with you; but after this, never speak to me again. You're a despicable cur ever to make such a proposal—and if you touch that gun I'll kill you!"

He drew back quickly as Cunningham fumbled at his waistband, and the treacherous hand fell slack. Cunningham had had it in his mind to draw and shoot from the hip, but Ranchester had been too quick for him.

"Oh, well!" he said. "What's the use of having trouble? You go your way, and I'll go mine."

"Very well," agreed Ranchester.

Backing out of the door, he mounted and rode swiftly away.

XXVI

THE passing days had brought nothing to Levi Heminway but an answer to his prayers. His enemies had been punished, and Bill Dhue had been hung; but the interest on his mortgage had run on. Every day that he knelt and prayed had brought foreclosure so much nearer. His boys had left, and had not returned.

Now, with the last week of grace slipping past, he continued to wrestle and pray. The children walked softly past his bedroom door, gazing hungrily back at their mother. Prairie Rose stepped into her chaps and slipped the six-shooter under her belt. Without a word, she went down to the corral and caught up her best-looking horse.

As she was mounting to go, her mother came running down and stopped her.

"Oh, are you leaving, too?" Mrs. Heminway quavered.

Prairie Rose nodded grimly.

"I'll be back," she said. "Don't worry, mother."

"But how can I help worrying, Rose? The children are always hungry, and all he does is sing and pray. You won't be long, will you, Rose?"

"I'll be back by the 1st," promised Prairie Rose. "There's no use staying here."

"Won't you tell me where you're going? You know the mortgage is due then, and—and I suppose we'll have to go somewhere."

"Unless we pay it off," said Prairie Rose. "I'm going down to get the money."

"Money! But how? Oh, you won't do anything wrong? I couldn't stand that, Rose!"

"Don't you worry," answered Prairie Rose. "I guess I can take care of myself. If we can't pay off the mortgage, we'll pack up and move. It won't be the first time we've done it."

"No, but he's mortgaged all the horses and everything we've got, except what's exempted by law—"

"Well, we'll take that, then," said Rose. "But don't you worry, mother—I'll bring back the five hundred dollars!"

She nodded and smiled eagerly, reining her horse out through the gate. Then she turned back impulsively.

"I'm going down to Cheyenne," she said, "to ride in the Frontier Day contests."

"What? With all those rough men? Oh, Rosie, you can't mean it! And how could you get all that money?"

"They've offered five hundred dollars for the best lady rider, and I figure on winning it. It's called the ladies' world championship, but I don't care about that. The money is what I'm after."

"But you might get killed!" her mother wailed.

Prairie Rose looked back somberly.

"Yes, and I might starve to death," she retorted. "Don't you worry—I'll be back by the 1st."

She threw the spurs into her horse and went galloping off up the road, swinging down at the gate as he stopped. Then, as she closed the gate behind her, she waved a gay hand and leaped into the saddle at a bound. The morning was bright and fair, God was still in His heaven, and she was setting forth to conquer the world.

It was the day before the contests when Prairie Rose rode in across the plains and followed the crowd through the Frontier Park gate. Within the outer fence there was still another inclosure, with the grand stand on one side, and from the arena inside there came the patter of racing horses and the shouts and loud laughter of cowboys. An army of workmen were hurrying to and fro, setting up peanut stands and stalls for the hawkers.

For a while Rose sat on her horse, watching the ebb and flow of traffic, her brain almost numbed by the tumult. Contest riders in gaudy chaps came trooping in from town, making the "how" sign to grinning Indian braves. From a gate on one side a band of horses thundered past, close herded on their way to the corrals. They were the bronchos for the cowboys to ride. A herd of steers followed, to give practice to the ropers.

Prairie Rose rode over toward the stables, where a huge man was shouting out orders. He was superbly mounted on a strawberry roan horse, and when he stretched out his hand in an impatient gesture, Prairie Rose caught the gleam of a mammoth diamond. It was Jim Drake, the manager, and men came to him from all sides on a hundred different errands.

After waiting for some time, the girl spurred toward him, but a cowboy pushed ahead of her.

"No, you can't do it," broke in Drake, cutting short the man's appeal. "I told you that once before. Now, young lady, what can I do for you?"

He fixed her for a moment with his masterful black eyes, and Prairie Rose found her voice.

"I want to enter the ladies' bucking contest," she said.

"There ain't going to be any," he answered shortly. "Here, Charley, where you going with that saddle of Phil's? Well, you put it right back where you found it."

"It's announced on the program, and I saw it in the paper," persisted Prairie Rose, as he continued to ignore her.

"Well, I'm running this show, and I tell you there won't be any. Of course, if you know more than I do about this—"

"But I came down on purpose," she cried.

"I can't help that," he stormed. "It's all a put-up job between the press agent and that knot-headed committee. They wanted some pictures of cowgirls to put in the papers, and announced it without even consulting me. Got a bunch of these town girls in their peekaboo shirt waists to come out here and pose for riders; but I tell you, young woman, there won't be no contest, so you might as well go back home."

"Yes, but why?" she pleaded. "I'm not scared of getting hurt. I can ride as well as a man."

"Well, maybe you can," he admitted, after an appraising glance at her horse; "but you're the first one I've seen, up to date. It takes three to make a contest, and we'll have a try-out this afternoon. If they don't qualify, there won't be any contest. And lemme tell you, kid, you'll have to ride some to qualify. I'm against all this flub-dub, myself. I'm a showman, understand? Been in the business for twenty years, and I tell you these lady riders are the bunk. If one of 'em gits hurt, or maybe killed, by her horse falling, the whole audience will git up and leave. It 'll crab the whole show. I know what I'm talking about; but all right, you can come to the try-out. I'm going to show up that committee, so they'll keep their hands off after this, and let a man run this show that knows how. They ain't none of them town girls can ride!"

"Well, I can't do anything else," answered Prairie Rose, and Jim Drake nodded shrewdly.

"Where'd you come from?" he asked, after a brief silence.

"Thunder Mountain," she said. "We run horses up there. I've been raised on a ranch all my life."

"Ain't rigged up very fancy," he observed; "but if you can ride, it's all right with me. Got any place to stop in town?"

"Well, no," she faltered. "I haven't."

"Come over here," he said.

Putting the spurs to his showy roan, Drake trotted him over to the cook house.

"George," he called, "give this young lady her breakfast. Let her eat here as long as she's in town."

He turned his horse away without listening to her thanks, and Prairie Rose went into the cook house. It was a rough board shack with a long tent attached to one side, in which was a double row of tables; and in company with a nondescript lot of cowboys she sat down to her first meal that day. How he had guessed it she did not know, but Jim Drake knew that she was hungry.

As she ate, her courage came back. Drake was against the ladies' contest, but he was not against her, if he did talk so loud and rough; and perhaps, after all, there would be other girls besides herself who could qualify for the bucking.

She spent the rest of the morning watching the cowboys practicing their stunts, and when the rehearsal was called she was there.

The chairman of the committee came riding out from town, with a bevy of girls at his back, and half an hour later they were gathered about the horse chutes, while the wranglers brought out a broncho. With his mouth drawn down sullenly, Jim Drake looked on from a distance, peering out from under the rim of his huge hat; but as the wranglers blindfolded the horse, and stood waiting for orders, he rode over and surveyed the fair riders. Except for two or three, they were enameled a ghastly white, to protect them from the burning sun. Despite their buckskin skirts and cowboy sombreros, they hardly looked the part.

"Well!" he said, turning to glower at the chairman. "Here they are, eh? Do you think they can ride? Put one up on that horse, then, and we'll just see what happens. Any killing will take place right now!"

"I'll ride him," announced a voice.

A tiny woman stepped forth, almost hidden beneath the rim of an enormous hat. She was dressed in silk tights thrust into high-topped riding boots, and her shirt waist was as low-cut as the rest; but when she stepped down from the conquered horse, Jim Drake grumbled unwilling praise.

"Yes, of course," he said. "She's a professional!"

"She rode him, didn't she?" sneered the chairman.

"Sure! That's one; but put up some of those town girls. Hey, Johnny, bring out old Squawkiller!"

Drake grinned sardonically as a fighting sorrel was brought out and snubbed to the horn of a saddle.

"Now, ladies!" he said. "There's a regular horse. Don't all speak at once—who'll ride him?"

A grim-lipped blonde stepped out from the bunch, and handed over her saddle to the wranglers. One of the men reached out carefully and took Squawkiller by the ears, while a second worked the blind over his eyes. Then, when the saddle had been cinched firmly in place, the cowgirl put her foot in the stirrup.

An electric shock seemed to pass down Squawkiller's spine, arching it up like the back of cat, and as she settled into the saddle the muscles along his legs began to twitch and crawl like snakes. The wrangler jerked away the blind, and with one tremendous bound the sorrel sprang into the air and flung sidewise. The girl clutched at the horn, there was a whirl of dust, and she landed on her face in the dirt.

"Next!" announced Drake.

As nobody else responded, Prairie Rose stepped out with her saddle.

"I'll ride him," she said.

Drake smiled.

"Sure!" he answered. "I'll take your word for it, kid. I'm talking to these *cowgirls* here."

"Well, I don't think it's fair!" pouted one of the prettiest. "We didn't come out here to get killed."

"No, that's it," jeered Drake, sticking his lip out scornfully. "That's what I've been saying, all the time. You're just out here to show off your shape; but lemme tell you, young lady, I'm running this show, and you can ride that horse now or stay out. The audience will laugh its head off when a cowboy gits busted; but if a girl breaks her shoe string, and sets down to fix it, half the women in the grand stand will faint. This cowgirl stuff ain't my idea at all, but the committee has shoved it off on me, and as director of the arena I'm playing safe. If we break any dishes, we're going to break 'em in the kitchen, where the guests won't get nothing but the noise!"

"Yes; but, Jim," argued the chairman, "that's a dangerous horse. A man would hardly dare to get on him. Can't you bring out some gentler horses that will—"

"No!" said Drake stubbornly. "There's my horse—let 'em ride him. I'm the boss in this arena. You keep out!"

"Yes, but I'm the chairman of the committee, and we've advertised this event—the first cowgirls ever competing in the West. A new championship contest, featuring the women of the frontier—"

"Let 'em keep in their place, then!" snarled Drake.

"Aw, here!" spoke up a rawboned, hard-featured woman, who had been standing off by herself. "I'll ride that hawse—quit yore talking!"

She strode out toward the wranglers, her divided skirts flapping, but with a grim, fighting look in her eyes. When Squawkiller was saddled, she tied her stirrups under his belly and shook out a heavy quirt.

"Quirts is barred," objected Drake, "and them hobbled stirrups are dangerous. If he falls, he'll break a leg for you, sure!"

"This ain't no contest," announced the rawboned rider. "I'm going to show you that hawse can be rode. My name is Cattle Kate, from the Laramie Plains, and you can bet your bottom dollar I'm a peeler!"

She swung up into the saddle and jerked the blind out herself.

"Turn 'im loose!" she yelled, and swung her quirt in the air.

Squawkiller jumped as he felt the fierce jab of her spurs and the bite of the loaded quirt. After making a few bucks, he straightened out into a lope, and the ladies' championship contest was saved. Three women had qualified, though Prairie Rose had not ridden. Jim Drake rode off, muttering to himself.

XXVII

After another night's sleep out on the open prairie, Prairie Rose rode back to the park, eating her breakfast with the roustabouts who handled horses for hard-swearing Jim Drake. He was there already, riding a beautiful *palomino* horse, cream-colored, with silvery mane and tail. As the morning wore on, and the parade began to form, his voice roared out like a foghorn.

"Where's that stage coach?" he shouted, as his supernumeraries hustled about. "Joe Bush, go hurry up them Injuns! And you cowboy there—*you!* Quit your dog-goned monkey business, or I'll have you throwed off the lot!"

The parade formed in a double line, with the cowgirls in front and the hairy-chapped cowboys behind.

When Prairie Rose saw the white shirt waists and fringed skirts of the town girls, she hid behind the cook house and cried. They had not dared to ride Squawkiller, but now, with the committee, they held the place of honor. Kitty O'Rourke, the Wild West show rider who had topped off the first broncho, was there in her costly silks. Even Cattle Kate, with her battle-ax face, mixed brazenly in with the rest; but Rose's shirt waist was too faded, her men's clothes too old and shabby, to wear anywhere, except in the contest.

She choked back her tears and looked wrathfully after them as they rode off behind the band; but when the afternoon crowd came, she swung up on her horse and went over to meet them in the arena.

Jim Drake was in a frenzy, shouting orders through his megaphone, and riding furiously to turn back scurrying boys. When she reported to him, he merely threw her a big cloth number and told her to wait there until she was called. She fastened the number across her back.

As Kitty O'Rourke and Cattle Kate appeared, Drake shouted across the field to the corrals:

"Bring down them three horses for the cowgirls! Hurry up, now! We'll pull this off first."

"But, Mr. Drake," protested Kitty O'Rourke, "we're fourth on the program."

"You'll ride when I tell you to," gritted back the arena director. "I'm running this show—understand?"

"Afraid the ladies will faint?" twitted Kitty.

"Not to-day," answered Jim Drake grimly.

He put Cattle Kate up first, to get her out of sight. Her horse rode a few jumps, and quit. Then Prairie Rose was mounted, and, though she raked him with her spurs, her horse only buckjumped a few times.

Kitty O'Rourke was last, and Jim Drake let her wait. She was a dainty little woman in her clinging silks, and when she stepped up on her horse, and beckoned the wranglers to turn him loose, the crowd in the grand stand cheered. He bucked along gracefully in a high canter, like a rocking horse, and that was all for the day. Prairie Rose crept away, hardly daring even to hope.

On the second day the town girls came back. They had gone over Drake's head, and filed a protest with the committee, and the orders were to let them ride.

"All right, I'll let 'em ride!" glowered Drake, and once more old Squawkiller came out.

"You don't ride at all to-day," he said to Prairie Rose. "You've qualified. The finals are to-morrow."

He glared at her with his compelling eyes, and jerked his head toward the gate. She rode away in a daze. Whatever he told her, she knew she had to do it, but uneasy doubts had assailed her. Jim Drake was a showman, and he knew Kitty O'Rourke—Cattle Kate said he knew her too well. They had been friends on the road. As Cattle Kate rode away with Rose, she proclaimed that the contest was framed, and that Kitty O'Rourke was slated to win.

Prairie Rose had her reservations about women who swore, and who laughed when the cowboys hooted; and as soon as she could she slipped away from her companion and rode off, sick at heart. She was not afraid to ride the worst broncho they had, but something told her that she would never get the chance.

Jim Drake was determined to put the committee in the wrong. He was determined to have his own way, and, unless all signs failed, he was determined to keep her out of it and let the pretty circus girl win. Prairie Rose had come there to ride—to risk her life, if necessary, to win the prize that would save their home; but in this maze of unseen forces she felt like a feather whirled about in the clutch of a maelstrom. She was nothing, a shrinking nobody in a world of strutting cowboys and white-faced, made-up girls.

As she heard a startled yell, instantly followed by a silence, she knew that some town girl had been thrown. Jim Drake was having his revenge.

"Oh, I wish he'd let me ride!" she panted; but he had told her to go, and she went.

She had just left the park, and was riding off up the road, when she heard the clatter of swift hoofs behind her. She whirled about quickly, with a smile on her lips, half expecting some friendly messenger. When she saw who it was, her heart leaped and stopped. Afton Cunningham was smiling back at her.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed. "How's the Rose of Thunder Basin? Still riding that high-stepping horse! I've got a mortgage on him, I suppose, but don't let that worry you. We'll fix that all up — eh, kid?"

He drew back his coarse lips in an insinuating grin. Prairie Rose returned a look like a knife stab.

"Saw you leaving," he explained. "As I was going back to the ranch anyhow, I thought you might like to go along. I'm there all alone now, so nobody will know the difference; and it's the only way out for you, Rose.

"My wild Irish Rose,
The sweetest flower that grows—"

"You shut up!" snapped Prairie Rose hatefully.

"All roses have thorns!" he laughed.

Prairie Rose reached for her quirt.

"Oh, I wish I was a man!" she burst out. "I'd kill you, you big, insulting pig!"

"Never mind now," he said. "Cut out the hard names—you might as well be a good sport. You've put up a game fight, but you've lost out—that's all; so why not look at it reasonably? I've offered you this mortgage once, and I'll do it again."

He reached into his pocket and held out

a paper. Prairie Rose reined out of the road.

"Just because we are poor," she spat back at him defiantly, "is no reason for you to insult me. If we can't pay off that mortgage, we'll pack up and go; and I think you're just—oh, hateful!"

"Quite the contrary," he winked. "I'm as loving as anything; but at the same time, kid, I'm not foolish. I knew what you were up to when you came down here to Frontier Day, so I fixed it with the judges for you to lose. You can ride your pretty head off, and that's all the good it will do you. They'll give the prize to somebody else."

"Oh, I—" She paused, her eyes blazing, her teeth bared with vexation, hate, and a devastating despair. "Go away," she choked, "before I kill you!"

She laid her hand on the pistol which she kept hid beneath her belt. Cunningham touched the spurs to his nervous horse.

"Go on now!" she threatened. "Don't you say another word to me! And I *will* win that prize-money—yet!"

He looked back over his shoulder with a sardonic smile, and galloped, mocking, off up the road. She gazed after him with flashing eyes, a fierce strength surging over her and making her long to rush after him and strike him; but as he sank out of sight in a swale of the great prairie, she turned aside and galloped off to the west.

"I will win!" she sobbed. "I will!"

The next day she went back with her jaw set and grim. When she saw Jim Drake, she rode straight up to him.

"You give me a bucking horse to-day!" she said.

The huge arena boss cocked his head and looked down at her.

"Who's running this show?" he inquired.

"Well, you are, but all the same I mean just what I say. I want a horse that will buck!"

"Was you around here yesterday when that town bunch come to pieces and had to be packed off in an ambulance? Well, think it over, kid. They're picking up hairpins out there yet, and I saved up my worst horses for the last."

"Oh, did you?" she beamed. "Then give me one, won't you? I—I've just got to win, that's all!"

"I'll give you what's coming to you, and not a damned thing more," he stated, and motioned her out of the way.

It was the last day of the contests, and the crowd in the grand stand was taking a part in the game. They had settled upon their favorites, and a booming wave of applause welcomed each rider as he came on the field. First the relays were run off, and the finals of the steer-tying; and then, when the bulldogging had roused their taste for blood, Jim Drake announced the ladies' bucking contest.

Quite contrary to his prophecies, the slaughter of the day before had brought out a record crowd; and as the thin-lipped blonde, sole survivor of the town girls, came out to make her ride, she was greeted with tumultuous cheers. Kitty O'Rourke bowed and smiled as she rode down in front of the grand stand and threw her saddle over the fence into the arena; but when Prairie Rose and Cattle Kate appeared they were stared at in stony silence. Practically no one had seen them before, and Jim Drake hustled them over to the judges.

"Now, ladies," he said, "this is the grand final in this event, and the horses will be drawn by lot. Don't blame me if you get a bad one, and don't thank me if you get a good one. Here's the judges—talk to them!"

"Well, I want a bucking hawse!" announced Cattle Kate in a voice that carried to the stands. "I came here to ride, and—"

"You'll get one!" laughed Drake.

When the judges saw her number, they exchanged significant glances. She had drawn old Corkscrew, a bad one.

"Cat-tle Kate will ride Cork-screw!" shouted the announcer from his crow's nest in front of the grand stand.

The wranglers brought the horse out on the run. He was a big, rawboned bay, who had already thrown two cowboys, and he snorted and flew back on the rope; but Cattle Kate looked on scornfully as the wranglers wrestled him into submission, and swung up on him with her jaw grimly set.

"Let 'im *go!*" she called.

As the blind was jerked off, she slammed him over the head with her hat. He jumped once and stopped, crouching down like a rabbit, as she kicked the hair out of him with her spurs. Then, with a back-breaking leap, he flung three circles in lightning succession, and Cattle Kate grabbed for the horn. She caught it going past her, for Corkscrew had reversed himself; and the next moment she went overboard and down under his feet, where he kicked at her twice, but missed. She rose up, fighting mad, and cursing like a range cook, and the grand stand rocked with laughter.

"Kit-ty O'Rourke will ride Benson Annie!" shouted the announcer through the din.

A vixenish looking mare was trotted out. Prairie Rose looked it over anxiously as the saddle was put on and the dainty little woman made her bow; and as the blind was pulled off her heart sank within her, for Benson Annie bucked just hard enough.

For ten—yes, twenty jumps, she pitched off across the field, ending up in front of the stand. At every buck the graceful circus girl swayed and posed, riding prettily, even waving her hand. The grand stand trembled with shouting and the thunder of applauding feet, and then the announcer called for the blonde; but though she was the favorite, she forgot, and grabbed the horn, and the judge's pistol ended her ride.

"Disqualified for pulling leather!" came the announcement.

Then Prairie Rose was called. She stepped out quickly, all afire to mount and ride; and as the spectators saw her in action, striding forth confidently like a boy, they gave her a hand of applause.

"Prairee Rose Heminway will ride Watch Eye!" shouted the announcer.

Jim Drake came down with the horse.

"Look out for him!" he warned, edging over toward Prairie Rose. "He's a fence-buster. Keep him out in the open!"

"I'll ride him!" she answered, hardly knowing what she said. "I'll ride him—I'll ride him!"

She ran out with her saddle the moment the blind was in place, and slapped it on his back herself. Then, as the wranglers exchanged glances, she cinched it on till he squealed, and leaped into her place.

"All set?" they asked, as she gripped the long halter rope and grabbed off her hat for the fight.

When they pulled off the blind, she raked Watch Eye with her spurs, and they were off to a mountain-high jump. She gripped him with her knees as he struck and leaped up again, but the jar made her head snap back; and when he landed the next time, her hair came tumbling down and went lashing across her face in twin braids.

Five times he rose up squealing and came down with a grunt and a jar that seemed to shake her to pieces. As her knees began to weaken, Prairie Rose's head snapped back and forth, burying her face in a mass of black hair. Everything was turning around and around, but she hooked him with both spurs, and in a flash she found herself upright and riding. Old Watch Eye was running for the fence!

There was a flash of anxious faces, of wranglers spurring to head him off, and they cleared the race track railing with a bound. Another flash of scattering spectators, and with a crash of splintered pickets Watch Eye smashed through the fence and fell sprawling.

From the press stand and band stand the men fled in a struggling mass, seeking shelter in the high-timbered grand stand. As the bravest rushed in to seize him, Watch Eye leaped up with a grunt, and stood rolling his chalky eyes wildly.

"Look out!" yelled the stands.

As Prairie Rose grabbed with her spurs, he went smashing through chairs and benches, breaking the railings down like matchwood. Then, mad with the desire to scrape her off against something, he turned and crashed back into the fence.

"Look out!" they yelled again; but Prairie Rose had forgotten everything but the fixed idea she had started with.

"I'll ride him!" she had repeated a thousand times, and even when he crashed she held on.

"*Cra-ack!*" went the rotten pickets.

The crosspieces held firm, and Watch Eye fetched up short; but Prairie Rose went on, over his head and out on the race track, still clinging to the halter, but thrown. As she lay there, sobbing, a crowd of men rushed up, and she was lifted to her feet, unhurt.

Half stunned, but smiling wanly, she listened to their praise, and then, when they left her, she crept off into a corner where she could cry and not be seen. She had made a good ride, but Watch Eye had thrown her, and the circus girl would win the prize. She alone of all the riders had kept her seat in the saddle until the judge's pistol was fired. Prairie Rose had done her best, but she had lost.

With her horse standing over her, she lay hidden among the weeds until the last contest was brought to a close. Then, as she finally roused up, she saw a horseman looking down at her. It was big Jim Drake.

"Well, kid!" he exclaimed. "Where have you been all the time? Come on down with me—we've been looking for you everywhere!"

"What for?" she asked, sitting up.

"Why, you've won first money—champion lady bronk rider of the world! Come on down and git your purse!"

"But I fell off," she objected, smiling dolefully.

"Oh, that don't count," he scoffed. "The judges gave you first place. Come on—the whole outfit is waiting."

"Yes, but how could I win the money when I fell off my horse?" she wailed. "I tried to stay with him, but he threw me."

"Aw, kid," he laughed, "you don't understand. The judge fired off his pistol when you hit that first fence. What happened after that doesn't count."

"Oh, did he?" she cried, leaping suddenly to her feet. "And do I get the whole five hundred dollars?"

"You sure do," he said, "and a complete cowgirl outfit from the swellest store in Cheyenne!"

"Oh, honestly?" she beamed.

Then, through her smiles, the tears came trickling down.

"What's the matter? What's the matter?" Drake burst out impatiently.

When she told her story, his lips were quivering, too, and he wiped away a furtive tear.

"By God, kid!" he said. "You're dead game—I'll say that! When did you say this note was due?"

"Why, *to-morrow!*" she cried. "Oh, I'm going to ride all night, so I can be there when he comes for his money—the horrid, hateful thing!"

"We'll take care of him," promised Drake. "Git up on your horse now, and come down to the grand stand. They're announcing the prize winners right now."

She mounted like a whirlwind, and they galloped down to the judges' stand, where the committee was waiting to receive them. When she rode up, smiling radiantly, the grand stand rose and gave her a cheer; and then the money was put into her hand.

"No, I'm going!" she called back, as Jim Drake motioned her to wait. "I can't stop—it's seventy miles!"

"Yes, but listen, kid," he said. "I've been talking to a banker, and he says we can telegraph that money. Wire it up to the Laramie bank, and have it placed to his account. That 'll save you a long, hard ride."

"But I want to be there," she danced, "when he comes in to take the ranch away! I just want to see his face! And then I'll step out and put this money in his hand—"

"I'd like to be there myself," Drake grinned; "but say, here's what we'll do—this banker will wire the money, so there can't be any slip-up—understand? Then he'll give you a paper that you can show at the ranch, and you can stay over for the big banquet to-night. We'll get the cowgirl outfit first, and fix you up right, and crown you Queen of Cheyenne!"

"No, I can't wait," she decided. "There's mother. She'd be frightened, you know, if he got there ahead of me."

"Yes, that's right!" agreed Jim Drake, patting her affectionately on the shoulder. "You're a good girl, Prairie Rose; but when you get through—"

"I'll come back," she promised.

By sundown she was galloping across the plains.

XXVIII

It was a big night in Cheyenne. At the Frontier Day banquet, Jim Drake told the story of Prairie Rose; but while some were reduced to tears when he told about the mortgage, one guest rose up and stalked out. It was Ranchester, his eyes bleak with rage. He had been there, and had seen the girl ride, but he had seen others ride better; and this story of the mortgage brought back memories of Afton Cunningham, and blacker ones still of Bill Dhue.

Drink as he would, try as he would, he could not escape it—the thought of poor Bill on the gallows. As he strode into the bar, he muttered curses at every step, turning away from chance acquaintances with a snarl.

"Give me a drink!" he ordered.

As the barkeeper reached for the bottle, Al Hardigan came lurching up.

"Good evenin', Mr. Ranchester," he said with drunken presumption. "Shake han's! No, tha's all right—shake han's!"

He stood holding out his hand. Ranchester looked at him.

"Go away from me!" commanded the ranchman, frowning.

"Tha's all right," mumbled Hardigan. "I ain't trying to sponge a drink; but come on, shake han's with me, major!"

"You murdering cur!" burst out Ranchester, striking the proffered hand aside. "You sold your best friend for a thousand dirty dollars, and then ask *me* to shake hands!"

He shuddered and drew back. Hardigan stood swaying, as if he had been struck in the face.

"Well, all right!" he retorted. "You don't need to be so superior. I could tell a few things about *you!*"

"Go ahead and tell them," invited Ranchester, "but don't hold out your blood-stained hand to me. Bill Dhue was your friend, and for a thousand dirty dollars you betrayed him into making that confession. The brand of Cain is on your forehead, and that Judas look in your eyes will remain with you till you die. Poor Bill is gone, but he died like a brave man. He was not afraid to die; but, Hardigan, when you die—"

"Tha's enough, now," broke in Hardigan. "Tha's enough!"

"Well, go away from me!" cursed Ranchester. "Go and spend your Judas-earned dollars! Drink yourself to death, and rid the earth of an incubus! And may every drink you take remind you of Bill Dhue—the best friend a man ever had. You sold him, you cur, and you know it!"

"You're a liar!" burst out Hardigan, stung to the quick by his accusations. "It was Cunningham that sold Bill Dhue. I took my thousand dollars, and God knows I earned it; but he took ten thousand, and crooked *you*. You don't need to be so virtuous, giving a poor man like me hell—why don't you go around and talk to him?"

"Go away from me!" shouted Ranchester irritably.

"No, I won't go away," returned Hardigan stubbornly. "Now, listen, I'm going to tell you something, Ranchester. You think Cunningham is your friend, now don't you? Well, what did he do with that ten thousand that you gave him to do—well, *you* know what? He kept it, and let Bill Dhue hang. That wasn't any of my doings. If he'd blowed the whole jail down and turned Bill Dhue loose, I'd have got my reward all the same. 'Arrest and conviction'—that was all I was after; but he told that yegg to lay down. He never even tried! And you shake hands with Cunningham and call me a dirty cur!"

Hardigan burst out weeping at the injustice of it. Ranchester stood regarding him sternly.

"Come over here," he said, leading the way to a card room, and ringing the bell for the drinks. "Now," he said, motioning Hardigan to help himself, "what's this about that ten thousand dollars? You seem to know a great deal for a roughneck detective—"

"Oh, a roughneck, eh?" leered Hardigan. "Lemme tell you something, then—Cunningham took his orders from *me*. I did the thinking, he did the work—and now he won't give me my cut!"

His flushed face became distorted with a sudden fit of rage, and he brought his fist down on the table.

"But I'll fix him!" he cursed. "I'll learn him to gyp Al Hardigan! I'm burned out on this country, anyhow, but before I leave I'm going to do it one more good turn. I got Bill Dhue, and I'm going to git Afton Cunningham. He'll never leave Wyoming alive!"

He nodded significantly and slapped the butt of his automatic, which was hung in a sling under his arm.

"I'm going to git him," he went on, "if I have to follow him all over the world, but he'll never leave this town alive. He's gone back to the ranch, to git together his love letters, and girls' garters, and junk like that; but the man don't live that can gyp Al Hardigan. I'm a detective, and I'm a good one!"

"Then I'd hate to meet a bad one," observed Ranchester bitterly; "but even a hangman has his pride."

"I'm a detective!" reiterated Hardigan. "I can read you like a book. Do you think you're smarter than I am? Then lemme tell you what I said to Cunningham, that day we framed it all up. 'Send up and git Ranchester,' I says. 'He's the only man Bill Dhue will believe. And then,' I says, 'fool Ranchester, and you've made a fool of Bill Dhue.'"

"In what way did you fool me?" inquired Ranchester quietly.

The drunken detective grinned.

"In every way," he said. "Didn't you tell Bill the jury would be hung? Didn't you fall for that fake jail break and keep Bill quiet for three weeks—up to within ten days of when he was hung? And right there at the last, didn't you keep him from telling all he knew? That was my work—I thought that out myself!"

"You're a deep thinker, Hardigan."

"Am I deep?" demanded Hardigan.

"Well, I did it all—and then this drunken fool gyps me. He held out all that money he'd collected from the cattlemen to keep Bill from telling what he knew; and then, by grab, when I frame this fake jail break, he holds out every penny of your ten thousand dollars!"

"Well, we both lose," said Ranchester, looking his man over grimly. "I lose my friend, and you lose your money. What now, Mr. Detective? What's next?"

"What next?" repeated Hardigan. "This is next," he said, and patted the automatic. "I'll let him git his love letters, and dig up the sluff money he's been knocking down on the Seven D's; and then, when he comes to town, and thinks he's making a clean git-away, I step up on the train—understand? That's all, except this"—and he patted his big pistol—"at some little flag station, in the night. Then I git it all, understand?"

"I understand perfectly," said Ranchester, rising up to go. "I wish you joy with that ten thousand dollars."

"Where are you going?" demanded Hardigan, kicking his chair back suspiciously. "Don't you tell him what I said, or I'll kill you!"

"Not a word!" promised Ranchester. "You can depend on me."

"Well, where you going, then?" repeated Hardigan. "I want to know."

"I thought I'd go back to the ranch," answered Ranchester, "if it's perfectly all right with you."

"You stay here!" ordered Hardigan. "Get me?"

"Take that!" hissed Ranchester, lashing out with his right.

Hardigan fell like a log. Ranchester stood looking down at him, the automatic in his hand, a sarcastic smile on his lips.

"You drunken fool!" he said, stirring him up with his foot. "So you thought you'd kill Cunningham, eh? Well, I haven't much to live for, but that's one pleasure I still promise myself!"

He started for the door, then checked himself suddenly.

"One can never tell, though," he muttered, and left the automatic on the table.

XXIX

It was morning, and Prairie Rose was happy as the meadow larks as she jogged up the Thunder Mountain trail. Until far into the night she had ridden across the prairie, camping at last on the open plains; but though she was tired, her joy would not let her sleep, and at dawn she was up and away.

In the brush along the creek beds the baby rabbits were leaping with gladness. Singing meadow larks swayed on the tree tops, and, as she loped across the flats, the prairie dogs by thousands sat up to watch her pass. The day had come—and the mortgage was paid!

As she gazed with solemn eyes at the broad sweep of earth and sky and the pine-tipped mountain before her, she thought of God and all He had done for them, and of all the prayers He had answered. Never again would she doubt that God Himself was just above her, looking down from His heaven with all-seeing eyes, and taking note of even the sparrow's fall.

As she rode up on the bench, and looked back over the long trail, she saw a horseman, far behind. When she reached the first timber, he came whipping up the bench, and in a flash she knew it was Ranchester. Her heart leaped—and stopped. Then it leaped again, for joy, and stopped again, as she saw how he was riding. Never before had she seen him whip his horse.

She paused in the trail, undecided whether to wait for him or to ride on as if she had not seen him. At last she rode on, looking back over her shoulder, still hoping, still fearing his black anger.

At Frontier Park he had passed her by without even a look or a nod; but she had felt his eyes upon her as she swung up on old Watch Eye, and the thought of him had steeled her for the ride. Now that she had won, now that she had shown she was not afraid, perhaps—but who could tell?

Ranchester was two men—one all tenderness and kindly consideration, soft-spoken, grave, and smiling; but the other man was his devil, his baser self, stern, harsh-spoken, domineering.

She shrank away as he clattered up the trail, not knowing whether he had followed her or not. Then he rode by, with his eyes straight ahead, and never so much as looked at her. He was angry. Was he angry at her?

She hesitated, and then followed along after him. As he topped a low ridge and plunged down into the swale, she spurred forward to keep him in sight; and then, over the top, she saw him whipping up the slope as if a devil possessed him. Prairie

Rose stopped and watched him, letting her laboring horse rest, while she thought out the reason for his haste.

What was there on Thunder Mountain, or even on the Chugwater, to make him ride like that? He had not sought her. Was it Cunningham he was after? Or was it—her heart stopped—the mortgage?

She raised her quirt, and her jaded horse leaped forward. She had guessed it—he was after their mortgage!

Down the hill and over the rocks she rode after him at a gallop, not knowing what he intended, but determined to thwart him, to fight for their home to the last. As she turned up the slope and plunged into the timber, she imagined their cabin in flames. She saw visions of vengeful cowboys driving off their horses and cattle, and of her family fleeing to the hills. Once more she saw the hate that had glowed in Ranchester's set face as he passed, and the grim, strained look in his eyes.

When her horse suddenly stumbled, and half fell in the trail, she still tried to spur him on. He stumbled again and fell, his sides puffing like bellows as he labored to get back his breath. As she sprang to her feet, she heard the crack of a pistol. Then came silence, and she saw a horse galloping toward her.

Down the trail through the timber he came like a thunderbolt, stirrups and reins flailing up and down; and as Prairie Rose jumped aside, Ranchester's horse went flying past, his shoes striking smoke from the rocks. Her own horse scrambled up, and, as she sprang to catch his reins, another patter sounded from up the trail. It grew to a gallop, a tattoo of iron feet, a thunder, as a third horse pounded over rocks.

As she jerked her own animal out of the way, Prairie Rose saw the rider, leaning forward and coming like the wind. It was Afton Cunningham, his eyes big and wild, his face set in a savage grin. As she shrank back among the trees, Prairie Rose knew at a glance that something terrible had happened. What it was she would not guess; but when she ran up the trail, she found Ranchester, face down among the rocks.

She had known it from the first, when she had heard the report of a pistol and his riderless horse had raced past; and when Cunningham rode by, she knew who had killed Ranchester. The story was written on the murderer's face. But when she saw the major's body, and the blood on the rocks, she reeled back and uttered a low cry.

"Oh, he killed you!" she moaned.

Falling on her knees, she took his head in her lap. A gush of blood that seemed to leap from his very heart ebbed out as she laid him on his back, and when she tore away his shirt she saw the holes where the bullet had entered his side and come out through his back.

"He's dead!" she sobbed, watching the blood as it flowed out.

Her tears fell on his face; but as she held him, he moved and half opened his eyes. She put her hand on his heart. Beneath the welter of blood it was still beating faintly.

She sprang up and bound his wounds tight. Then, snatching up Ranchester's hat, she hurried down to the creek, and brought it back dripping with water. As she splashed it in his face, he stirred again, and began to breathe.

She knelt down at his side and prayed. What she said she did not know, more than that she begged God to spare him, and to let him live to repent. As she washed away the blood, Ranchester opened his eyes and looked up at her doubtfully.

"What's this?" he said.

She looked into his eyes and smiled.

"I prayed," she said, "and God brought you back to life again. He shot you through the heart!"

"Who—God?" he asked, and she saw his mind was wandering.

"No — Cunningham," she answered soothingly.

"What's all this about God?" he demanded irritably. "Did He shoot me through the heart?"

"Perhaps," she said, "but He brought you back to life again. Would you like a drink of water?"

She held the rim of his big hat to his mouth. He drank a few swallows, and sighed.

"Well, he got me," he said. "I'm done for!"

"Oh, no!" she insisted. "I've tied up the two wounds, and they're scarcely bleeding at all."

"Through the heart, eh?" he muttered. "Well, it's all for the best. This mockery will soon be over!"

He drew a deep breath and closed his eyes again, and for a long time he lay like one dead. Prairie Rose ran for more water, and washed away the blood that had flowed from his side and back. As she covered up the holes, and drew the bandage tighter, the wounded man struggled and tried to sit up.

"Oh, no, no!" she cried, pushing him back on the ground again. "You mustn't move at all. Oh, you've started it all to bleeding!"

She clasped her hands against the wounds, and as she felt his heart still beating she sobbed out a broken prayer.

"Oh, please don't move!" she begged, but he raised a feeble hand and laid it across his heart.

"Where's the wound?" he asked.

As she placed his finger on it, he blinked and let his hand fall.

"I'm a tough bird," he murmured. "Ought to be dead before this. The scoundrel shot me through and through. Hardigan will get him—I attended to that—and now I can die and forget!"

He closed his eyes and lay breathing heavily, stirring uneasily, and clutching at his side.

"Never mind!" he said, as Prairie Rose began to sob. "Don't pray for me any more. I was not afraid to live, and I'm not afraid to die. Don't pray—I don't deserve it!"

"Oh, yes, you do," she cried. "I know you never meant it. You never meant to dare God to strike you dead."

"Yes, I did," he sighed; "and I believe He has done it. Poor old Bill may have been right, after all. But no matter—it will soon be over."

He lay back limply, and to Prairie Rose, watching his face, it seemed as if his life had passed out; but beneath the bloody bandage his heart still beat on.

She looked about wildly for help, but the trail was as empty as the cloudless sky above them. She bowed her head beside him. It was all that she could do to kneel and pray for him.

He laid a feeble hand on her knee.

"You think a lot of me, Prairie Rose," he said with a wan smile. "After all I have done to you, too! It almost tempts me to want to live, but my death warrant is signed. Can I say a few words before I go? Well, I'm sorry, then, my little one, that I have treated you so badly and scoffed at your pretty advances. I have known that you loved me—or tha you might, if I were kind; but some devil of perversity took hold of me. I might have done many things to make your lot easier. Now, before I go, let me tell you that I loved you all the time; but I was possessed of a devil, like the man in the Scriptures, and so I have ruined our happiness!"

"Oh, but try!" she implored. "Just try to live, and God will do the rest. He sent me here to help you, to bind up your wounds. Can't you pray and ask Him to forgive you?"

"No, I can't," he said. "But you do it, Prairie Rose. Where's the wound where it came out behind?"

She knelt down and guided his hand to the spot beneath the bandage. As he held it there, he felt the other wound.

"What the devil?" he exclaimed. "Why, this is impossible! That bullet should have killed me instantly."

He ran his hand along his side, feeling tenderly here and there, and then he dropped back and stared.

"By the gods!" he gasped. "I believe it followed a rib! Let me see now—how was it when he fired? I had just drawn my pistol and held it out to shoot—yes, I must have been turning when he shot. Well, well! Can you beat that for luck?"

He laughed to himself and settled back contentedly, but Prairie Rose was slow to believe.

"Are you really all right?" she asked. "Didn't the bullet go through your heart, after all?"

"Certainly not," he declared, "or I never would have moved a hand. The Ranchester luck pulled me through. My father wore a plate on the top of his head where a bullet just grazed his brain."

"Then didn't I bring you back to life?" she faltered. "I mean, wasn't it an answer to my prayer?"

"I don't know," he said, turning his face away.

For a long time he lay there thinking. Then a hot tear splashed down, and he looked up quickly, with a flash of conviction in his eyes.

"I believe you did," he said, and took her hand in his. "God or no God," he went on, as she gazed down at him worshipfully, "I believe in the prayers of a good woman. My mother used to pray for me—and now it is you; but you'll need all your grace, Prairie Rose!"

THE END

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NOT so many years ago Diphtheria was the black enemy of childhood. All over the world it claimed a frightful toll. And the tragedy was that three-quarters of its victims were little tots under six—hardly more than babies. Swiftly it struck with deadly result—*without warning*—and there was no sure way to combat it.

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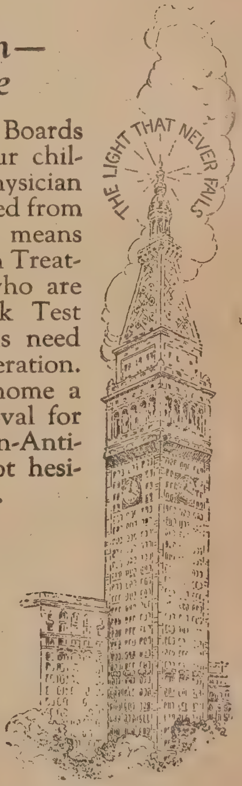
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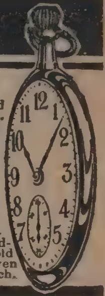

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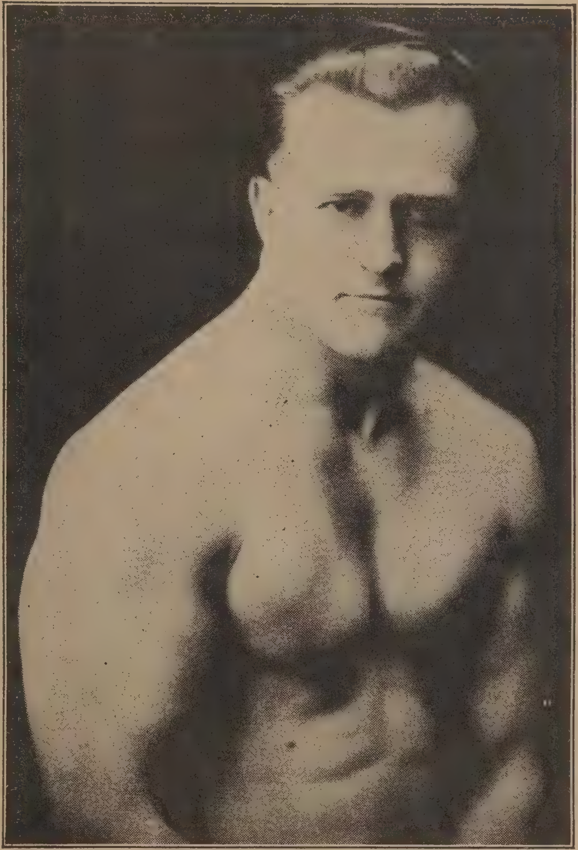

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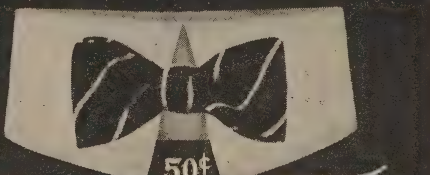

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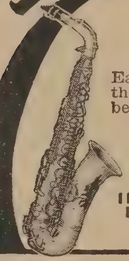

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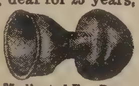

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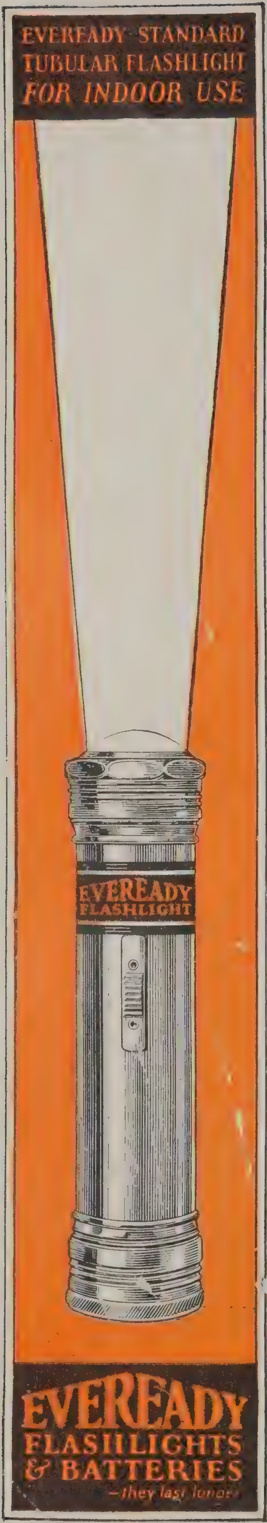

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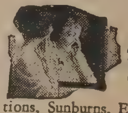

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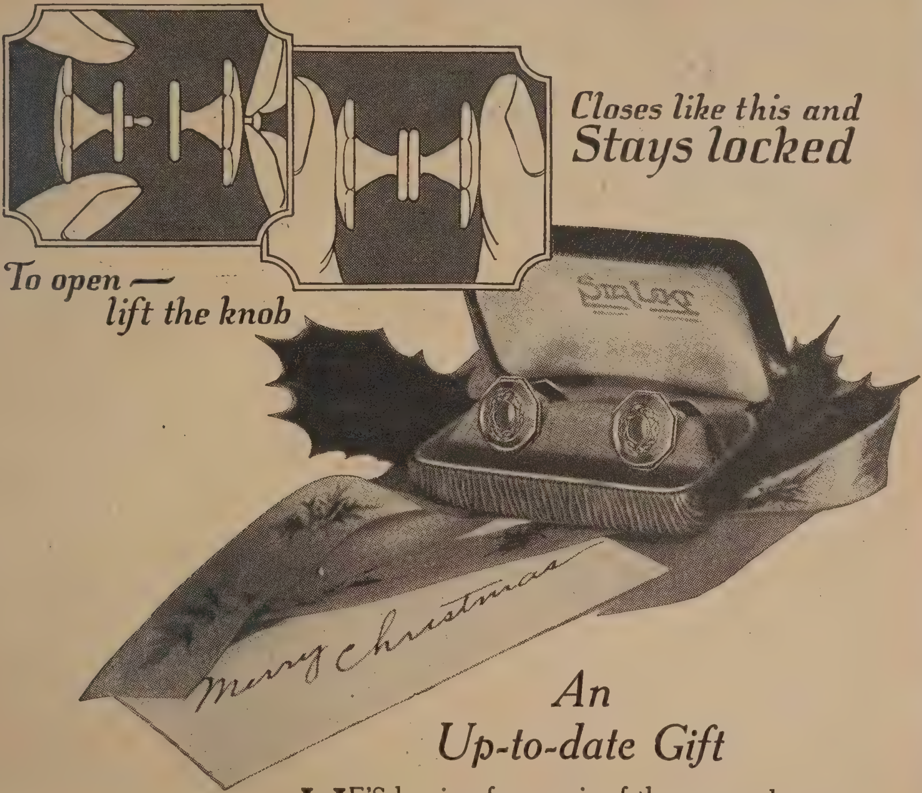

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MAGAZINE

DECEMBER, 1923
Vol. LXXX NUMBER 3

The Voice of the Desert

A COMPLETE NOVELETTE—A STORY OF ADVENTURE IN SOUTH AFRICA AND THE AMERICAN WEST

By L. Patrick Greene

ACROSS the barren sand dunes of the Kalahari, South Africa's great thirst land, moved a little party of men, women, and children. They were indifferent to the torturing heat of the noonday sun, and the fine, powdered sand — each grain burning, like a red-hot needle, with the absorbed heat of countless centuries—did not impede their progress. Yet they wore no protecting raiment, but were naked save for a narrow loin cloth.

There are no landmarks in the heart of the Kalahari, no beaten tracks. To-day's light breeze—it is like the gust of hot air from an enormous oven—will eradicate the footprints of yesterday; yet the gray-bearded man who led the party did not once deviate from the course he was following. He had been following that course for three days—three days of hard trekking, three days without food or water—yet they all looked well fed and content. The desert is kind to her own people.

As they marched, they sang weird, unmusical chants—chants which perhaps had their origin in ancient Egypt and the worship of Isis. Sometimes the children joined in the singing. More frequently they ran ahead, tumbling head over heels, pelting one another with the fine-grained sand.

By sundown the travelers came to the *kanya veldt.* Here the level surface of the desert was paved with small, round stones about six inches in diameter, packed so closely together that they nearly touched, while about two-thirds of their bulk was buried in the sand.

" Here we rest," said the leader in the guttural, clicking dialect of his race, more like the chattering of monkeys than the speech of civilized man.

The others crowded about him, jabbering excitedly. The old man waved them on one side with a lordly gesture.

" It is even as the child of Cagn said," he assured them. " To-morrow we will come to the place of drinking. See there, those of you who have eyes to see!"

He pointed toward the setting sun, where, silhouetted against the orange red of the western sky, they could see a black mass of rock, shaped somewhat like the figure of a kneeling man.

"Aye, Graybeard is right," assented one of the younger men. "To-morrow at sundown we eat and drink our fill!"

The other men made the clicking noise of happiness, and each hollowed out a bed for himself in the sand. The women pulled up the bulbous plants which grew between the stones, and, having gathered a goodly quantity, shared them with the men and children. These plants, something like turnips in appearance, they munched with great enjoyment.

For a while they were silent. Then one of the women—her name was Cagn—called the attention of the others to the antics of her son. He, a fat, roly-poly two-year-old, was crawling on hands and knees, his eyes riveted on the ground before him, following the *spoor* of a tiny tortoise.

Not once did the child falter or seem at a loss. Guided only by the almost imperceptible marks made by the reptile's claws, he crawled steadily on until a gurgling cry of triumph announced to the others that he had caught up with his quarry.

"He is greater than us all," said Graybeard. "Nothing is hidden from him. What animal has a keener nose? What bird has better sight? The spirits have given him in abundance the knowledge that was our fathers', that has, in some part, gone from us. It is time that he was named. What will you call him, Cagn?"

"Cogas, Graybeard," the mother replied proudly.

"The choice is a good one. The great spirits will always be at his side to give him counsel."

II

Tom Armitage—known to many in South Africa as Hard Luck Armitage—decided that on the morrow he would be compelled to acknowledge that he had failed once again. He dared stay at this desert water hole no longer. Already he had exceeded the safety limit by several days. His provisions were running low, and he would have to go on half-rations—a risky procedure, as he well knew, for the desert saps a white man's strength, and he cannot afford to lower his vitality by economizing on food.

His two pack mules—the bones of two others were bleaching in the sand where they had fallen on the trip out—were thin and poor-looking, and Armitage doubted whether they could carry a full load on the return trip.

The tent, he thought, and much of the equipment which made life in the desert at all bearable, would have to be left behind. Even then the terrific heat, the shortage of food, and the lack of water, might cause the mules to founder long before he reached the little settlement of Boers on the outer fringes of the desert. If so, the name of Armitage would be added to the long list of those who had set out to conquer the desert—and failed.

Armitage rose wearily from the camp stool which he had placed in the modicum of shade afforded by the tent, and, taking up a telescope—its brass case was almost red-hot—carefully scrutinized the desert in all directions. His gray eyes, wide-spaced, filmed with weariness, and the little wrinkles at the corners deepened with disappointment. His glass showed nothing to break the deadly monotony. He saw nothing but a vast expanse of glaring white sand.

He placed the telescope carefully on the little table inside the tent, and slowly reseated himself.

"I suppose I was a fool to come," he muttered, talking aloud, as men whose business takes them to the unexplored regions of the earth so often do—it keeps them from going entirely mad. "But it looked like a good thing. Five hundred pounds and expenses just for getting hold of one of the Little People! Who wouldn't take a chance? Everything was in my favor. It isn't every chap who can jabber their talk—not that I know much of it, at that—and I bet I'm the only white man who knows this water hole. It looked like a good thing—five hundred quid easily earned!"

He smiled wryly and moistened his cracked lips with his tongue.

"I wonder what that American professor expects to learn after he's measured the cranium of one of the Little People—if I get one for him. He calls 'em the missing links, but at that they've got more brains than he has, for all the letters he runs after his name. He'll be mad if I go back to him empty-handed, and I'll be sore myself. It seemed so easy! All I had to do was sit here and wait for them to walk up for water. Just as easy as that!" He shrugged his shoulders, which were broad and well set. "Well, just another of my schemes gone wrong. Next time I'll be all right. Luck must change some time. Can't always be bad."

He rose and walked slowly over to the mules. They were tethered, to prevent them from stampeding to the water hole and polluting it.

The beasts stood with their heads drooping dejectedly, their bellies drawn in, their flanks hollow. They constantly raised one hoof after another in a sort of grotesque dance, seeking respite from the terrific heat of the sand, which penetrated their hard hoofs. They looked reproachfully at Armitage as he approached, as if conscious that he was responsible for their detention in this place of torment.

He patted them, examined their backs, and carefully picked off some inch-long, blood-sucking desert parasites. Then, dipping a cloth into the water bucket, he sponged the animals down. They feebly nickered their thanks for the attention.

"We'll go back to-morrow," he announced. "Before sunrise we'll be on the trek!"

One of the mules put back his ears and brayed. Armitage laughed. For the moment, he looked no older than he really was. His white teeth flashed, and his laugh was boyish and immensely likable.

He watered the animals, to each one a bucketful, holding the bucket up for them to drink, and thus sparing them the effort of reaching down. He gave them a meager feed of corn. Then he returned to his tent, and lowered his long, lean frame to the camp stool once again.

He sat there for a while, ruefully meditating on the seven days' trip back to the settlement; but most of all he thought of the rough horseplay and good-humored raillery that would be leveled at him when his friends learned that he had failed again.

After a while he lazily bestirred himself. Lighting a fire, he boiled some coffee and opened a tin of bully, which last he curried; but it was all labor in vain. He could not drink the bitter, scalding coffee, and he gagged at the curry. Yet he was hungry, and the meal, considering all things, was quite luxurious. The loneliness of the desert was getting him. Still, being of a breed which is slow to admit defeat, he muttered:

"If it would rain, I'd take a chance and wait just one more day. As it is—"

He looked up, but there were no signs to encourage a weatherwise man. There was not a cloud in the pitiless electric blue of the sky.

The sun was setting. Even as Armitage watched, it dropped with the speed of a falling shot below the horizon, appearing to plunge into the sand and to be swallowed up in the desert sea. The adventurer listened breathlessly for a moment, as if expecting to hear a tremendous hissing and to see the clouds of steam that would follow the extinction of the molten globe. He laughed presently, a trifle shamefacedly, at his conceit.

For a few minutes the western sky glowed faintly; then darkness came, and with the darkness a light breeze sprang up. The breeze brought no relief from the torment of heat—accentuated it, rather. The air was literally scorching. It seemed to dry up the blood, and made breathing a difficulty.

After a while, moaning fitfully, the breeze died away. Then, suddenly, as if a black curtain had been swept aside by ghostly fingers, the stars appeared. They looked very near—oppressively near and large—and the sky shimmered like a moonlit sea. The desert sand reflected their light, glowing phosphorescently.

The temperature dropped to about one hundred degrees. Armitage, feeling the comparative chill, wrapped himself in a blanket, and in a few minutes he was fast asleep.

Hardly had his eyes closed when two men came to the water hole. Having satisfied their thirst, noiselessly, making no false step despite the deceptive light of the star-strewn sky, they examined the camp equipment.

The mules, taking alarm at the strange scent of the men's bodies, squealed and lashed out with their heels. Armitage moved uneasily in his sleep, and the two men became two dark splotches of shadow on the sand—motionless, soundless.

Anon, when the fear aroused in the sleeping man's subconscious mind by the squeals of the mules was allayed, and his deep breathing gave evidence that he was once again in heavy slumber, the two shadows rose and resumed their inspection of the camp; but they did not again venture near the mules. Instead, they gave all their attention to the tent. Squatting on the ground near the camp cot on which Armitage was sleeping, they gazed fixedly at him. Their eyes gleamed with childlike curiosity.

After a while they rose, as if obeying an imperative command—though no word was spoken—and left the camp. They did not go far, but halted behind an enormous sand dune. Here they sat down, face to face, their feet touching, and, regarding each other intently, conversed.

It was a strange conversation—a silent one, broken at intervals by clicks, grunts, and coughing barks. It was carried on in the world's most primitive language, the tongue of nature's children, the Little People, the Bushmen of the Kalahari.

Scientists, basing their judgment on the degraded specimens who have been enslaved by the Bechuanas, say that the Bushman is the missing link. If that terminology is correct, the true Bushman must be the link between man and the Power that created man—not between man and beast. His senses, unblunted by the conventions of civilization, are attuned to catch nature's faintest whisper. His body is his servant, not his master.

Because of all these and other things, the language of the Bushmen is what we please to call primitive. Their vocabulary is small, and lacks inflection. Yet the two hundred words they know are all sufficient, for they are used only to supplement signs and the ability to read one another's mind pictures.

"Kill!" said one. "Take!"

The other—his name was Cogas—knowing that his companion advocated killing the white man and taking his goods, shook his head. Murder was forbidden by the code of the Little People.

Namqua sneered. He visualized the contempt the tribe would show when they learned that their leader, Cogas, had proved himself a weakling, and had refused to take for them the wealth of the stranger with the white skin.

That mind picture vanished, and another took its place. He saw himself doing what Cogas feared to do — killing the stranger and distributing all his strange and priceless possessions among the tribe. He saw Cogas deprived of his leadership and himself, Namqua, hailed as chief. His fingers tightened on the heavy stick he carried.

"No!" Cogas said firmly. "Great spirit angry," he added quickly, with many expressive gestures. "Soon big wind, big rain. Stay, live. Go, die!"

Namqua looked up at the sky, to the north and to the south. He rose to his feet and stretched his hands high above his head, as if to catch any stray breeze that might be blowing. His mouth was wide open, his nostrils were dilated.

Presently he sat down again and laughed contemptuously; but he turned his head on one side, so that his companion could not look into his eyes. He had reached a decision, and did not wish to give warning of it.

If he had hesitated before, it was because of his fear of Cogas—or, rather, of the chief's great power. Cogas never failed; he knew all things. When but a stripling, the graybeards had gone to him for advice. Because of his wisdom, his all-embracing knowledge, they had made him head of the tribe. And now, on a night like this, he spoke of wind and rain! Truly all wisdom had gone from him, and he was no longer one to fear.

Namqua rose swiftly to his feet and brought his stick down on Cogas's head with all his force. He aimed two more blows, lightning swift, at the chief's ankles, and he gazed wonderingly as the victim of this treacherous attack slowly toppled over. Then, filled suddenly with strange, newborn fears, the rebel fled panic-stricken from the place.

III

An hour passed—two hours. The stars disappeared. From the north there came a low wailing sound which momentarily grew louder and came nearer.

Cogas, the Bushman, subconsciously aware of impending evil, vainly endeavored to free himself from the bonds of unconsciousness which held him fast. The mules tossed their heads uneasily and strained at their tethers. Armitage, the white man, sleeping on his camp cot two hundred yards away, moved fitfully. He almost fought through to wakefulness, and then lapsed into a deeper, heavier sleep.

The blackness of the night deepened, thickened. It was a murky, foglike blackness. The low wail rose to a shrill scream, and the ground vibrated to the sound of it.

The two mules, squealing with terror, broke loose from the ropes and galloped swiftly away, seeking to escape the unknown menace.

Then Armitage awoke; but he awoke too late, for, whistling, shrieking, groaning, the desert storm was upon him, driving everything before it. His tent vanished, plucked from the stakes by the force of the wind. The cot tipped crazily, throwing him to the ground, and, released of his weight, hurtled after the tent.

As a man might in a horrible nightmare, Armitage staggered to his feet, with a vague idea of regaining his tent and bed. He could not stand erect, and it was with difficulty that he kept his feet at all. The terrific gale of wind shook and twisted him as if he were a desert weed.

Fully awake now, his faculties keenly alert, he ran before the wind, seeking to get to the lee of an enormous sand dune, which, he knew, was a few hundred yards to the south of the water hole. Something heavy, moving with great velocity—it was his iron cook kettle—struck him on the back of the head, and he went down like a log.

Several minutes passed, and he did not move. Then, very slowly, he resumed his journey, crawling on hands and knees.

The air was thick with sand. It cut and bruised him. It entered his ears, his nostrils, his eyes. If he parted his lips, ever so little, it swept into his mouth, choking him. It beat upon him with relentless fury, and each grain seared like the prick of a white-hot needle.

Every few yards he was obliged to rest, lying prone, covering his face with his hands. When he did so, the sand beat upon him like a leaded mantle, weighing him down.

After a while the gale ceased, as suddenly as if some mighty hand had stopped up the Cavern of the Winds. Its cessation created the impression of a terrible void, of a hellish vacuum—no land or sky, no air—nothing but an abysmal and impenetrable darkness.

Darkness and sand; for now the air precipitated its load, which fell as if an enormous dump cart had been uptilted. The force of it beat Armitage to the ground, and held him helpless, incapable of movement. It fell upon him like a shroud, and it was with difficulty that he kept his face uncovered.

There followed a monstrous calm—a brief truce, that the forces of nature might gather strength for the final attack. Then the black vault of the heavens was torn in two by a vivid flash of lightning. The peal of thunder which followed was like that which heralded the flood.

And then came the rain. The drops were large, and followed one another so swiftly as to form an unbroken stream—ribbons of water coming from out of the darkness above, and vanishing into the darkness below.

At first Armitage welcomed the rain. It was cleansing and cooling; but soon he was reduced to a state of abject misery, and shivered because of the cold. He thought, too, of his scattered equipment, knowing that the chances were against his ever recovering it, or any part of it. The mules, he thought, might return to the water hole with the coming of morning—that is, if they had survived the storm, and had not stampeded too far; but if the mules did not return, and if he could not locate his provisions, why, then—

After a while, realizing the folly of conjecture, reasoning that to worry was only borrowing trouble—for not until morning and the passing of the darkness could he properly estimate his situation—Armitage relaxed. He would need all his strength on the morrow, and to preserve that strength he must sleep.

Because he was an outdoor man, accustomed to the hardships of the life of the *veldt*, and had slept more often in the open than inside a roofed dwelling, sleep came very easily to him. He merely thought of sleep, and the sand storm, the pelting rain, and the tortures that the morrow's sun would surely bring, were blotted from his conscious mind.

IV

WHEN Armitage awoke, the sun was well above the horizon. His head throbbed painfully, his face was covered with minute cuts, and his body seemed one big bruise.

He stretched himself cautiously, groaning with the pain of burns and bruises. In doing so, he dislodged the little mound of sand which had packed upon his back.

He rose slowly to his feet, and, shading his eyes with his hand, scanned the desert in all directions, hoping to see some sign of the mules. He was doomed to disappointment. His anxious eyes saw nothing

—nothing but mile after weary mile of sand.

Apparently the storm had not affected the desert one iota. Nothing seemed to have changed. It was as if the vast volume of rain had been poured into a bottomless pit. No trace of it showed on the desert floor.

When Armitage stubbed his feet, a cloud of fine dust arose. For a moment he was tempted to believe that the storm and the rain were but figments of his imagination; but he knew better. The unchangeable desert, which looked now just as it had looked yesterday, and as it had looked for countless years of yesterdays, had changed.

The sand dunes had become valleys, the valleys dunes. The rocks which showed to-day were not the rocks of yesterday. Where the dunes had run east and west, they now ran north and south.

He narrowed the circle of his vision, and looked back to where he had made his camp. There was nothing left to say:

"Here a white man stayed a while, cooked his food, and slept."

Everything was gone—everything save an empty water bag and a collapsible canvas bucket, which, by some strange freak of the storm, had remained to mock the adventurer.

The rocks which had marked the water hole were hidden completely by drifted sand, and Armitage could only guess at their approximate location. This, and the realization of all it meant, completely unnerved him. Running back, he began to dig in the sand where he imagined the water hole to be.

A few minutes of this induced clear, straight thinking. Pulling himself together, and pouring ridicule upon himself for so quickly giving up to despair, he picked up the canvas water bag, and from it made for himself some sort of headgear. He needed it, for already the sun was beating on his spine with relentless force.

While thus engaged, he quickly formulated a plan.

The storm had come from the north, and the mules had undoubtedly run before it. Very well, then — he would trek south. Perhaps he would catch up with them, or he might meet them returning to this spot. Once he had the mules, his chances of winning through would be that much greater. He would give them their heads, and they would perhaps lead him to water; or he could kill one, and, living on its meat, make a break for the nearest Boer settlement.

He resolved to start at once. He could not afford to sit idle. Every moment some of his strength was sapped from him by the terrific heat. It was a forlorn hope, this plan of his, but anything was better than to sit there and wait for death to overtake him. Death—but first desert blindness, torturing thirst, and madness. A horrible way to die—the desert way!

He slowly rose to his feet, picked up the bucket, and tied it to his belt. Then he faced south, and, with head bent, shuffled off. As he did so, a vision of green fields and bubbling springs tempted him to turn aside, but he resolutely closed his eyes to the mirage.

A strange noise came to his ears — a groaning sound, as if some one were in pain. He ignored it at first, but, as he went on, it grew louder.

"Sounds as if some one were hurt," he muttered. Then he shook his head angrily. "Oughtn't to be going batty so soon!" he complained. "There's no one here—no one within miles. I'm utterly alone."

Something moved in the sand, about twenty yards ahead of him. He rubbed his eyes, closed them for a moment, opened them, and looked again.

There was no doubt about it—there was something moving in the sand just ahead of him, and that something was moaning.

"My God!" Armitage cried. "It's a man—a Bushman!"

Breaking into a staggering run, he came up to the place where a thin, black arm waved feebly. Kneeling down, he carefully brushed the sand from the face of a Bushman, who was lying half buried in the desert drift. That done, he uncovered the rest of the body.

All his fear for self had disappeared for the moment. In the place of fear came the knowledge that he was no longer alone, and that here was a human being who needed his help.

"Poor devil!" he muttered. "Knocked on the head, and couldn't take care of himself through the storm. Has swollen ankles, too." He felt them with tender, understanding fingers. "No bones broken," he continued; "but I bet he can't walk, and that means—"

He shrugged his shoulders and fell into a moody silence as knowledge of his predicament came to him with fresh force.

The Bushman, who had been watching him through half closed eyes, now barked one word.

"Water!" he said.

Armitage shook his head, and brushed his right hand across the palm of his left.

"Water gone," he said.

The Bushman frowned, and repeated firmly:

"Water!"

As he spoke, he struggled to a sitting position, and pointed to a sand dune some eight hundred yards to the east.

"It can't be," Armitage said aloud, in English. "And yet it might. These little chaps know everything like that. They have to, or they couldn't live in this hell hole. Might as well try it. It 'll make him feel better."

He rose to his feet, and, walking with the air of a man who knows he is going on a vain errand, started off in the direction indicated by the Bushman. He had only gone a few paces, however, when he halted, hesitated for a moment, and muttered:

"If I don't take him now, I'll never have strength to come back for him. Perhaps I'm a fool, but—"

He returned to the Bushman, who, after one grunt of disappointment, chuckled happily. He read Armitage's mind picture very easily. When the white man knelt down beside him, he did not need the verbal explanation, "Carry," to know what was intended of him. He put his arms around his rescuer's neck and held on tightly.

Slowly Armitage rose to his feet, with the Bushman, making the clicking noise of happiness, on his back. Once again he set off in the direction of the sand dune.

Despite the fact that the Bushman weighed little more than seventy pounds, Armitage found the going very hard. The sweat dripped from his forehead into his eyes, blearing his vision. His head throbbed, his lips were cracked, and his tongue felt like a piece of blotting paper.

After a while he ceased to perspire, for there was no more moisture in him. He felt like a piece of dry twig. He suffered the sensation of extreme brittleness, as if at any moment he might snap in two. His feet sank ankle deep in the sand, which seemed to drag him down like quicksand.

Several times he stumbled and almost fell headlong, but each time he recovered with almost superhuman effort, and plodded doggedly on, ignoring the Bushman's repeated cries of—

"Go! Stay!"

These were accompanied by gesticulations which meant that Armitage should go on alone, refresh himself with water, and then return for the wounded man.

Armitage did not trust himself, nor did he believe that he would find water at the sand dune. He knew that if he left the Bushman behind, he would never have the strength or the courage to return for him; and somehow he could not bring himself to desert the little man.

So on he went. His eyes closed. He dared look no longer across the blinding glare of the sand. His mouth sagged open, his breath coming with painful, choking gasps. Several times he strayed from the course, only to be brought back by the pressure of the Bushman's hands on his head.

After a long hour of many hundreds of weary paces—and with each pace the weight of the Bushman seemed to increase—Armitage came to the foot of the sand dune, and there he collapsed. He pitched headlong on his face, and cared not whether he ever moved again.

After a long while he pulled himself together and rose slowly to his feet. The Bushman had vanished.

He rubbed his eyes, and looked about with an air of bewilderment. Surely he had not dreamed it all! There had been a Bushman—he was sure of that. His back still ached from the weight of his burden.

Armitage was alone once again. Above was the sun, scorching, pitiless. At his feet and all about him was the sand, and that seemed unreal. It seemed to billow like the ocean. It seemed to dissolve into nothingness, leaving him, a puny atom of mortality, suspended between two great voids of the upper and lower hells.

And then, when he was about to give way entirely to despair, he was dimly conscious of some one shouting in a strange tongue, and he saw a man coming around the end of the dune, crawling on hands and knees.

Laughing hysterically, because his dream was not a dream, Armitage ran staggeringly to meet the Bushman. Coming nearer to him, he saw that the little man carried the shell of an ostrich egg suspended from a cord hung about his neck. Something in the shell made a *lapping*, musical sound—the sound of water.

Water!

Greedily Armitage snatched the shell and put it to his lips; but before he drank he looked at the Bushman inquiringly.

"More water," said the little man, jerking his thumb in the direction of the sand dune.

Armitage hesitated no longer, and drained the shell. It contained only two swallows, or at the most three, but the effect of them was magical. The white man was filled with fresh hope, his flagging spirits were spurred up, his stiffened joints were limbered. That little gulp of water had been as oil to a rusted machine.

"Good!" he ejaculated.

The Bushman grinned. As Armitage looked at the little man with something akin to affection, he was conscious that his diminutive companion was trying to tell him something of vital importance—something that was beyond the range of the Little People's vocabulary.

Whatever it was, thought Armitage, judging by the Bushman's gestures, he would discover beyond the dune; and so, picking up his comrade in his arms, he walked swiftly forward.

As he rounded the dune, he gave a loud shout of joy. His shout was answered by two feeble brays, for, attempting to clamber up a pile of rocks which had been uncovered by the night's storm, were the two mules.

Putting the Bushman down in the shadow cast by a large rock, Armitage ran to the mules, patted them, and hugged them excitedly. He had been half afraid that they were only visions which would fade away as he neared.

He turned away from them at last, at a shout from the Bushman.

"Water!" said the little man, and pointed to the top of the rocks.

Quickly Armitage climbed to the top of the pile, and there he discovered a bowl-like depression full of water.

The desert gods always provide for their children. The wind which had covered one water hole had uncovered this natural reservoir, and the night's heavy rain had filled it. The mules had scented it. The Bushman had *known* of it—how, no man can say; but the white man, being ignorant, might have passed within five yards of it and have perished with thirst.

Armitage drank sparingly and splashed himself until his clothes were saturated. Then he filled his canvas water bucket, and, descending the rocks, watered the mules. Four times he made the trip up and down the rocks, and then, when he judged the mules had had sufficient, he filled the bucket once again and returned to the Bushman.

"Let's have a look at your damages, now," he said, in English.

In answer to the other's inquiring look, he gently washed away the sand from the wound on the Bushman's head.

"That's all right," he said. "Nothing serious there. Bit painful, perhaps—that's all. If it had been a little harder—"

He thought if the blow had been a little harder, the Bushman would have been killed, and he himself would have perished miserably in the desert.

"It's a sign," he told himself hopefully. "Perhaps I'll get out, after all!"

He turned his attention to the Bushman's ankles. Tearing strips from the bottom of his shirt, he skillfully bandaged them, wetting the bandages with water.

"Go, now," he said.

His mouth was so dry that he had difficulty in making the clicks of the little man's language.

He led one of the mules up to the Bushman, and was about to lift him upon its back.

"No!" the little man objected. "Stay! Sun go—we go!"—meaning that they would not travel until the sun had set.

Armitage was at first inclined to disagree. He felt that he needed food, and the thought of remaining idle through the long day, conscious that with each passing moment somewhat of his strength would flow from him, was too much for him. He wanted to go on while he still had strength. When he could go no farther—then, and not until then, would it be time to rest.

Then it came to him that, had it not been for the Bushman, he would not have found water. After all, the desert was the home of the Little People, and they knew its ways.

He shrugged his shoulders, but remained silent, resolving to put himself entirely into the Bushman's hands.

All through that day they stayed beside the rocks—the Bushman crawling out into the full glare of the sun, where he packed the hot sands firmly about his bandaged ankles. At frequent intervals Armitage bathed the little man's head; just as frequently he watered the mules.

And then, at the setting of the sun, he lifted his companion to the back of one of the mules. With Armitage grasping the mane of the other beast—it was too weak, and Armitage too heavy, to carry him—they set out on their toilsome journey, the Bushman leading the way.

V

FIVE weeks later Armitage—a gaunt and haggard Armitage—and the Bushman came to the desert's edge. They were on foot, for the mules had foundered several days previously.

Before them, not a mile distant, they could see wagons moving—the canvas-topped wagons of Boer farmers. Armitage shouted with joy, and his eyes gleamed as the eyes of Moses must have gleamed at the first view of the Promised Land. He had never thought to see those wagons again, and the sight of them completely unbalanced him.

Suddenly he sobered and looked apprehensively at Cogas—for he knew the Bushman by name now. What, he wondered, did Cogas think of it?

During their weeks of weary travel in the desert, zigzagging from one Bushman cache to another, each day bringing them a little nearer their objective, Armitage had come to know and like the little man. The wanderers had suffered many hardships together. Days of starvation had been followed by orgies of eating and drinking, but the days of starvation had outnumbered the others.

Cogas had suffered only because he denied himself, again and again, that Armitage might have enough. It would have been easy, at any time after his ankles healed, for the Bushman to slip away from the white man; but he had stayed, and, because he stayed, Armitage had lived.

At first Armitage had planned that when they came in sight of a Boer settlement he would overpower Cogas, take him by force from the desert, and so fulfill his contract with the American professor. But as the days went by, and as he noted instance after instance of the Bushman's kindliness, wisdom, and self-sacrificing generosity, he discarded that project as an act of base ingratitude. It would have been worse than murder.

Now, as he looked at Cogas, he was surprised to see an expression of infinite sadness in the little man's eyes.

"My people," said Armitage. "I go. Your people—" He pointed back over the desert. "You go."

Cogas shook his head, and pointed to the wagons.

"Your people, my people," he said. "You go, I go."

Then he turned toward the desert, and, picking up a handful of sand, threw it in the air. A light breeze blew the sand toward the wagons.

Cogas smiled triumphantly. He turned his back to the desert, and brushed his right hand across the palm of his left.

"Your people, my people," he repeated firmly. "You go. I go!"

Armitage's face lightened.

"All right!" he said, in English. The words came with difficulty, as if he were speaking a strange language. "You shall go with me; but"—he raised his right hand aloft—"I swear that you shall return to the desert!"

He laughed softly at his theatrical pose, and Cogas chuckled sympathetically. Then the two of them set out for the Boer settlement and what lay beyond.

VI

THE tent of the side show attached to the Biggest and Best—really it was only a one-ringed circus—was crowded to the point of suffocation. Ranchers, their wives and children, cowboys, staid business men from the little town, and Indians from the reservation, all congregated to stare pop-eyed at the wonders "gathered from the four corners of the earth." Children's shrill cries of joy, amazement, or fear, the squeaking of toy balloons, the half human cries of some of the monstrosities, and the raucous shouts of the barker, were added to the din of a tuneless band, the jabbering of monkeys, and the cries of wild beasts.

The human freaks—the dog-faced boy, the man snake, the sword swallower, and the rest—looked down from their platforms on the pushing, struggling crowd of spectators with dull, lethargic eyes. Occasionally they would burst out into a noisy clamor and endeavor to wheedle people into buying cheap photographs of themselves; but they seemed to be indifferent as to whether their efforts met with success or not.

The air reeked; pungent animal smells mingled with the odors of peanuts, pink lemonade, and stale tobacco smoke.

Quickly the barker marshaled the crowd from one exhibit to another, coming finally to the platform at the far end of the tent, close to the exit. Upon it was a negro, naked save for a leopard skin about his middle. He was a little man, yet not a dwarf, for he measured nearly five feet. His face was beardless and free from wrinkles. His beady black eyes, which keenly scrutinized the upturned faces of the crowd, held much of the innocent wonder of a child's, and all of a babe's wisdom—that grave, sphinxlike expression which suggests knowledge of all things since the beginning of time.

" Here, la-dees and gen'l'men," the barker shouted hoarsely, " is Cogas, the Bushman! The only living specimen of his race in captivity! Brought at great expense from the heart of the African jungle! Half man, half monkey! Hear him talk and sing his native songs! See him dance! Cogas was captured by that intrepid and daring explorer, Captain Armitage. Captain Armitage "—he indicated the tall, sunburned man who leaned against the platform—" will tell you all about the little Bushman. When he has finished, we will proceed to the next and last exhibit—Marvello, the far-famed sword swallower!"

Armitage climbed wearily upon the platform. It was not a physical weariness, but rather an expression of his intense disgust for the rôle he was called upon to play. A half smile passed over his face as his eyes met those of the Bushman. His attitude toward the little man seemed to be one of apology.

He spoke a few words to the Bushman. They did not sound like words to the spectators, but more like the jabber talk of monkeys.

" Fake!" loudly whispered one of the cowboys.

The Bushman rose to his feet in response to a command, and commenced to pivot slowly, while Armitage called the attention of the crowd to his thin, shrunken legs, his distended belly—caused by alternate periods of fasting and heavy eating—his high cheek bones, and the curious growth of hair on his scalp.

" This little man," said Armitage, in a toneless drawl, " is over sixty years of age, yet he looks only thirty. He can go for days without food or water. He is very strong, and—"

" Fake!" yelled the cowboy who had first spoken.

Others quickly took up the cry.

" Fake!"

" Why, he ain't nothing but a runt of a nigger—a blamed ugly one at that!"

" Show us your stuff, cap. What's he got?"

The crowd milled around the platform, and wise mothers quickly got their children out of harm's way. A crowd is a funny thing, and will do cruel deeds in a spirit of jest. It needed a very little to start a free-for-all fight.

Then Cogas, his eyes blazing fiercely, turned and faced the crowd.

" White men, listen!" he said in his high, shrill voice.

There was something about the little man that held them, and they stopped their clamoring and struggles.

" Say on, little one, say on!" cried the jester of the crowd.

" Listen, then!" Cogas pointed a finger at them. He seemed to point at each individual, and to look into each one's eyes. " You say ' Cogas no good—Cogas a lie!' " He pointed to himself. " Cogas no lie! Here you say, ' No rain—never rain.' Cogas say, ' To-night it will rain—a little rain. One night go, then big rain!' "

This was greeted by uproarious cheers.

" Do you stand back of that, cap?" a cowboy asked Armitage.

" Yes—with all I've got. If that's not enough, every circus man in the tent will offer you odds."

" What? You mean—"

But he was not allowed to complete his sentence. The crowd moved on, carrying him with it. They judged Cogas a fake, and passed on to stare pop-eyed at Marvello, whose sword was a telescoping dagger which vanished up into the hilt when he pretended to swallow it.

Five minutes later the band in the " big top " began to play, and red-hatted circus attendants shouted:

" All out! Gr-r-rand parade now starts! Get your seats! No one seated after the parade starts!"

As if by magic, the side-show tent emptied of sight-seers. A few minutes later the freaks climbed down from the platforms and formed in line, ready to take their place in the parade of the circus performers around the big ring. After that they could retire to their own quarters and rest until the show in the "big top" was over. For an hour they could be plain people, and not freaks to be envied, pitied, or laughed at.

As they filed out of the tent, the barker turned to Armitage.

"Ain'tcha coming, cap?" he shouted.

Armitage shook his head. The barker spat in disgust.

"You're a damned fool, Armitage! Hewins 'll give you hell if you don't. Dock yer pay, most likely. Better come! Believe me, if I had a freak who could tell what the weather was going to be days ahead, like Cogas can, I'd be rollin' in dough!"

"That wasn't in the contract, Jake," Armitage returned.

Jake shrugged his shoulders.

"All right! It's your affair, not mine," he said, and hurried after the freaks.

If he wasn't on hand to supervise them, they would probably fight for the first place in the line of march.

Armitage seated himself on the edge of the platform, and, taking his knife—a broad-bladed one with a curiously carved ivory handle—from its sheath, he moodily whittled a piece of soft wood. Once he looked up at Cogas, and the Bushman grinned at him sympathetically.

The friendship between them, which had begun in the desert two years before, had strengthened with the passing of time. There was no need of speech between them now—at least, no more than would have been necessary between Cogas and a fellow Bushman, for they could read each other's mind pictures with ease. Even so, Armitage had painstakingly instructed Cogas in the English language, and the little man could understand nearly everything he heard, although he spoke little, and that with a queer accent and phrasing.

From the time they had arrived at the Boer settlement on the fringe of the desert until now, the two had undergone many hardships—hardships which dwarfed the purely physical discomforts of the desert. It seemed that the white man was fated to suffer all his life the ill fortune which had earned him his nickname of Hard Luck Armitage.

When he reached America, he discovered that the man who had posed as a professor, and for whom he had dared the perils of the desert, was really an agent who specialized in obtaining freaks for circus side shows. Penniless, in a strange land, handicapped from seeking other work by reason of the fact that he had to be with Cogas all the time—the Bushman could not be expected to assimilate civilization so quickly—Armitage was forced to accept the agent's offer. He signed a contract to travel with the circus and exhibit Cogas for three years.

Such a life was utterly distasteful to him. He was an active man, and young, and the circus held no glamour for him. Africa called too strongly.

But what hit him hardest was the fact that he felt that he had broken faith with Cogas. Although the little man did not complain, Armitage knew that he was pining for the sun-scorched desert spaces.

"Another year," thought Armitage, "and then—"

"Oh, Tom!"

Armitage dropped his knife, and, leaping up quickly, saw a dark-haired, gray-eyed girl, whose graceful carriage imparted a modish style to the linen dress and red tunic coat she wore.

"Daydreaming again, Tom?"

For answer, he took her up in his arms and held her high above his head. Then, as he lowered her, he kissed her on the lips.

Cogas chuckled softly, and, turning his back upon them, closed his eyes. In a few moments the little man was fast asleep.

"You ought to be billed as a freak yourself, Tom," the girl said breathlessly. "You're terribly strong! But"—she looked at him demurely—"you don't like circus life, do you? And I don't suppose you really like me!"

She lightly evaded his attempt to take her in his arms again.

"Why didn't you take part in the parade to-day, Tom?" she continued, in a more serious vein.

"It's not in the contract," he answered doggedly.

"I know, but it would make things easier for you, and for me. Uncle said—"

She hesitated.

"Well, what did he say?"

"That he'd beat me if I talked with you any more."

"He did! The—"

She put her hand over his mouth.

"Hush! Don't worry about that. I can take care of myself—now!" Her eyes flashed, and her whole bearing was one of supreme confidence. "There was a time when I didn't care much how he treated me; but that was before you came and taught me—lots of things. I can manage him, but I'm worried about you. He's mad because you don't play Cogas up properly. He says he's losing money on you, because you won't let Cogas prophesy about the weather."

"I'm ready to be paid off any time. He's holding a year's salary back—in bond, he calls it. Let him give me that, and we'll all go to-night. If he won't, why, I'll keep to the strict letter of the contract, and that's all."

"But don't you see, Tom dear—oh, why are men so stupid?—that if you do as uncle wants you can make bushels of money? You could sell hundreds of Cogas's photos for twenty-five cents each. You would make as much as twenty dollars a day on good stands, and in a year, why—"

"What do you want me to do, Mary?" he asked, smiling at her enthusiasm.

"Why, get Jake to teach you how to make a proper spiel. Folks don't go to freak shows to hear the truth. They expect to hear lies, but the lies have to be good ones. You'll do it, won't you? You'll need all the money you can get, if you're going to take me back to Africa with you; but perhaps you were joking about that."

"You know I wasn't!" He took her in his arms again, and this time she did not try to evade him. "I'll do as you say, Mary. I'll parade with Cogas to-morrow, and I'll tell the fools a whole lot of lies about him. They'll believe lies, perhaps; they won't believe me when I tell the truth. I'll ask Cogas to dance and sing, and—and to tell fortunes."

"Can he really tell fortunes, Tom?"

"Well, perhaps not that exactly; but you know he can tell you whether to wear your new hat, and whether to carry an umbrella or not. He can smell a rain storm a hundred miles away. He knows when a man is lying, and sometimes he can see what a man's thinking."

"I'll ask him some time, Tom, if you really love me!"

"Do you have to ask Cogas, Mary? Don't you know?"

"No—yes. Let me go, Tom!"

Laughing gayly, she ran from him. Just before she reached the exit, she turned to blow him a kiss.

A man appeared in the opening of the tent, his arms spread out, blocking her way. He was slovenly dressed, his eyes were bloodshot, and his face was covered with a reddish beard of several days' growth. He towered above the girl like a red-haired gorilla.

"Hello, Dowson!" she said breathlessly, a little startled at his sudden appearance. "Where you going?"

"The old man sent me for you, ducky," he said, with a drunken leer.

"All right! Here I am. Get out of my way, and I'll go and see what he wants."

He stepped aside, but, as she was about to pass him, he put his arm around her waist and kissed her noisily.

"Ugh!" she exclaimed in disgust, her eyes blazing with wrath. "Let me go, you drunken pig!"

She hit him in the face with her clenched fist. He laughed; but the laugh was cut short as, releasing the girl, he turned to face the charge of Armitage.

He might as well have tried to stop a rogue elephant, for Armitage broke through his clumsy guard and knocked him off his feet with a smashing uppercut to the jaw.

Dowson slowly got up. Wiping off the blood that flowed from the corner of his mouth with the back of his hairy hand, he muttered something which might have been an apology or a threat.

At that moment a middle-aged, showily dressed man, with distinctly porcine features, came running up, followed by a number of roustabouts.

"What's all this?" he grunted. "You fightin' again, Armitage? Well, I won't have it, do you hear?" His voice rose to a squeal. "As for you, Mary, get back to the ticket wagon!"

Putting her finger to her lips, as a warning to Armitage to keep his temper in restraint, the girl walked swiftly away.

"If I have any more trouble with you, Armitage," the fat man continued, "I'll have you kicked off the lot. You're no good, anyway. I could handle that nigger of yours better myself!"

"I'll tell you one thing, Hewins." Armitage's voice was tense with suppressed anger. "If you talk to me like that again, I'll thrash you so that you won't be able to sit down for a week. And as for this thing"—he indicated the scowling Dowson—"if he interferes with Mary—Miss Hewins again, I'll kill him!"

"Oh, that's what the trouble was about, eh?" Hewins assumed a more placating attitude. His tones were almost oily. "I'll deal with him. I've had enough of his drunken brawls; but I wouldn't talk about killing if I were you, Armitage."

He turned on his heel and walked away, followed meekly by Dowson.

Coming presently to the place where fodder was stored for the circus animals, Hewins sat down on a bale of hay, and motioned the sullen Dowson to sit near him.

"You're a damned fool, Red," he began abruptly. "I'm through with you — do you get that?"

Dowson grinned.

"Aw, boss, quit yer foolin'! You can't be through with me. I knows too much. Try to get me sent to the pen, and you goes, too—you knows that."

Hewins flinched, but was silent.

"No," continued Dowson, assuming a more belligerent air, "you ain't through with me, but, by God, you've got to come through with more money—get *that?*"

Hewins held up his hand warningly. A furtive look of fear passed over his face.

"Softly, Dowson," he said. "Some one 'll hear you."

"What do I care if they do?" Dowson blustered, but in a much more cautious voice he added: "You'll give me more money, and give it to me now. I'm tired of takin' all the risk fer small pay!"

"If I give you more money, you'll only get more gin—and you're more than half soused already."

"Whose business is that but mine?"

"When you're drunk, you talk."

"I can't get drunk. They ain't enough booze made. I'll keep my tongue still, all right; but silence is golden, they say, and you've got to pay for it!"

With a sigh, Hewins pulled a roll of bills from his pocket, peeled off five, and offered them to Dowson. The red-headed man waved them aside with a gesture of disgust and contempt.

"Gimme the roll!" he demanded.

Hewins's eyes narrowed, looking more piglike than ever, and his hand reached furtively to his hip pocket.

"No, you don't!" Dowson snarled, and grabbed Hewins's hand in one big, hairy fist, while he snatched the roll of bills with the other. "No shootin' here! Listen, Hewins, I'm wise to you! You'd like me put out of the way—I know too much fer you to be comfortable. Well, let me tell you something. I've got a paper here what tells all about the little schemes you've been running. I wrote it, and had it all signed and sealed by a regular notary—see? So, if I should meet with a accident—an' it's easy to have one of them fatal accidents working around a circus—why, they find that confession; so you'd better watch yer step!"

He rose to his feet. Hewins rose, too, panic-stricken.

"You don't carry that paper around with you, do you?"

"You bet—right here!" Red Dowson unbuttoned his coat and took from the inside breast pocket a long, legal-looking envelope. "It's all in there—and enough to send you up for a long stretch!"

He replaced the envelope and buttoned up his coat again.

"But," Hewins stammered, his face yellow with fear, "you might lose it!"

"Yes—I might, at that, and that 'd be hell for us both; but I'll watch it carefully. Goo'-by!"

"Where you goin'?"

"Like to know, wouldn't you? Well, I'll tell you. I'm goin' ter have a snooze in the freak tent. It's nice and quiet there."

He staggered away. About ten minutes later, Hewins followed him, carefully avoiding the circus hands, who were busy making preparations for striking the "big top" as soon as the night's performance was over.

Managing, by sheer luck, to reach his objective unobserved, Hewins entered the dimly lighted tent. He immediately located Dowson stretched out on the ground near the Bushman's platform, snoring noisily.

He tiptoed up to the sleeping man, knelt down beside him, and considered his chances of unbuttoning Dowson's coat and removing the envelope without disturbing the sleeper.

"I'm afraid to try it," he muttered. "If I had a knife, now, I could slit his coat and get at it that way."

He rose to his feet, intending to see if Marvello had left a sword on his platform. He noted a queer-shaped knife on the Bushman's platform. As his fingers closed upon it, his eyes blazed with an evil light.

"Two birds with one stone!" he chuckled softly.

Once again he bent over the sleeping Dowson. The hand holding the dagger rose—and fell swiftly.

The sleeper grunted once. His body twitched once, and then moved no more.

Quickly Hewins withdrew the dagger, which he placed on the ground, unbuttoned Dowson's coat, and took out the envelope. He then rebuttoned the coat, and, first peering under the tent to make sure that the coast was clear, he wriggled underneath the canvas and noisily joined a group of crap-shooting roustabouts.

VII

Under the "big top" the audience was being thrilled by the last acts. In ten minutes the fun-seeking crowd would pour through the many exits, and some of them, still under the spell of sawdust and circus glamour, would throng to the side show.

Intent on keeping his promise to Mary, Armitage came alone to the tent, heavily laden with African curios, with which he meant to decorate the platform on which Cogas was exhibited. As he entered, he was conscious of something wrong. Perhaps his supersensitive nerves, trained by the years he had spent on the South African *veldt*, detected the salty tang of freshly spilled blood.

He hesitated a moment in the entrance, half inclined to wait for some of the others. Then, laughing at his premonitions of evil, he passed in.

Coming to Cogas's platform, he saw the still form of Dowson stretched out on the ground.

"Wake up!" he said, and prodded the man with the toe of his boot.

Dowson did not move, and Armitage, kneeling down beside him, shook him. The man's head rolled back and forth, horribly grotesque.

"Hell!" Armitage exclaimed in amazement. Life on the *veldt* had brought him in contact with death too many times for him to know fear now. "Hell!" he repeated. "He's dead—stabbed. I wonder—"

By the side of the body he saw a knife. He picked it up. It was his own knife, and it was smeared with blood.

He rose to his feet, a call for the police on his lips. At that moment the circus electrician switched on the rest of the lights, and a crowd of the freaks and their managers came into the tent. With them was Hewins.

They crowded around Armitage, questioning him, listening to his explanations with incredulity. Hewins expressed the feeling of them all when he sneered:

"A pretty tale! You don't need to say any more. That's your knife, isn't it? And we all saw you bending over poor old Dowson as we came in. You threatened to kill him, not an hour ago? I heard you; so did some of these others. Well, now you've done it!"

Bewildered, yet realizing that the evidence was all against him, Armitage could only say:

"Better call the police."

Some one had already thought of that. Even as Armitage spoke, the sheriff, accompanied by two deputies, pushed hastily through the crowd.

That night a few drops of rain fell.

VIII

The inquest was a very short one, the verdict a foregone conclusion. Armitage refused to plead guilty, and firmly protested his innocence, but the evidence was all against him. He himself admitted that he would hang a man on such testimony.

And so he was held for murder, no bail was allowed, and he was committed to the Barstowe jail, to be held there for trial.

"I know you're innocent," Mary said, when she came to bid him good-by. "Keep up your courage, and all will come out right at the trial."

He smiled a little skeptically.

"It's no use, Mary. They've always called me Hard Luck Armitage, and the name fits."

He patted her hand gently, and turned to Cogas.

"Take care of her, Cogas," he said, "until I come again."

"When will Big Tom come?" the Bushman asked.

Only vaguely did he understand what it was all about. Even had his big white friend killed the red-headed man, it was a good deed.

"I'll come when you find out who killed Red Dowson."

The Bushman's eyes gleamed.

"Cogas knows!"

"You know?" Armitage said excitedly.

"You know?" Mary echoed. "Who was it?"

"The pig-faced man."

"Hewins!"

Mary and Armitage exchanged wondering looks.

"How do you know, Cogas?" Armitage asked.

"Cogas feels it—here"—and the little man put his hand to his side.

Armitage's spirits fell. He believed that Cogas was right, for the Bushman knew many things that were hidden from others; but his unsupported word would not be accepted as evidence. It would be laughed out of court.

"Cogas knows," the Bushman repeated. He would have said more, but at that moment the guard appeared, and he was forced to leave with Mary.

"Never mind, missy," he said to the weeping girl. "Soon — very soon — Big Tom will be with you again. Missy, tell Cogas—why don't they let him now come with us? Cogas knows Big Tom did not kill Redhead. The other man did that—Pigface. Why don't they take Pigface? Will they if Cogas tells them to?"

"No, Cogas—not unless you can make them see with your eyes."

He shook his head glumly, understanding now what she meant. He must find a *spoor*—a trail that led from Hewins to the murdered man. He must show that *spoor* to these foolish white people, whose eyes were blind—who could look into Big Tom's eyes and see evil instead of good there.

"Good, missy!" he said presently. "I will make them see with my eyes!"

IX

WHEN the circus train left Barstowe, late that afternoon, it was besieged by a mob of ranchers and cowboys, all seeking to get confirmation of Cogas's prediction that a heavy rain would fall that night. The slight rainfall of the evening of the murder had converted some of those who cried "Fake!" when the little man made his prophecy. Most of them, however, believed that it was only a lucky coincidence, and that the Bushman could not possibly have advance information regarding the weather.

The circus men could have told these skeptics differently. They had seen Cogas's forecasts come true again and again, and the tent boss consulted him every day.

Believers and scoffers—and the scoffers wanted to believe—would not be satisfied until they had again heard Cogas make the prediction. Hewins, who had taken the Bushman under his personal direction, reaped a rich harvest, for he collected a fee of five dollars from each rancher who was admitted to hear Cogas repeat his surprising prophecy.

Now the proprietor was seated with Cogas—the little Bushman was dressed in the scarlet and gold livery of the band—on the rear platform of the train, watching the crowd grow smaller and finally disappear.

"You are my property now," he boasted complacently. "You do as I say — see? If you don't, I'll break every bone in your body!" He shook his big fist under the Bushman's nose. "Here—have a drink!"

He passed a bottle of whisky to Cogas.

"Drink!" he commanded harshly, when the little man hesitated.

Putting the bottle to his lips, the Bushman drank deeply. The fiery stuff burned his throat. He coughed and gagged as if he were choking. Hewins laughed.

"Now you're a real man!" he declaimed, thumping Cogas vigorously on the back. "You stick by me, and I'll give you as much of that stuff as you can drink. Here—take these!"

He thrust a handful of cigars into the Bushman's hand.

"Now you stay here," he continued. "I'm going to play poker with the boys. I'll teach you how to play, by an' by."

Hardly had he left the platform when Mary came out. Her eyes were red and her face was woebegone. At first she seemed not to notice Cogas, who was squatting on his haunches, watching the endless ribbons of steel that seemed to be spewed out by the clanking, clattering wheels. Several times he gurgled softly to himself, and, with his head tilted back, sniffed the air appreciatively.

"What is it, Cogas?" Mary asked.

He looked up at her. She turned away in disgust at the odor of whisky that clung to him.

"The desert," he said. "Doesn't missy smell it? Big Tom, he would."

"Big Tom!" She breathed the name softly. "But he's not here, Cogas, and you have forgotten him. You have been drinking, and Big Tom would not like that. You are the friend of Big Tom's enemy. Big Tom is shut up—you have forgotten him."

"Maybe, missy," Cogas said complacently. "Maybe not. Cogas knew Big Tom before missy knew him."

They were silent for a while. Then Cogas said suddenly:

"Missy no stay here. Missy go back to Big Tom. Big Tom wants missy."

Her eyes lighted beautifully. Cogas had answered the question which had been torturing her. She would go back; but what could she do?

Again Cogas answered her thoughts.

"Missy go to man who took Big Tom away. Missy tell that man Pigface killed Redhead."

"And you, Cogas—you will come to him with me?"

He shook his head.

"No, missy—Cogas stay with Pigface. Missy?"

"Yes, Cogas?"

"How Cogas make men know Pigface kill Redhead?"

"Ask him, where many men can hear, if he killed Dowson, and see that he does not lie."

Just then the train slackened speed and almost stopped, as it came to a flag station. Before it gathered speed again, Mary jumped lightly to the ground and ran quickly into the operator's shack.

X

The train rolled on. The shacks of the flag station diminished to the size of dolls' houses, then to mere pin points, and finally vanished.

The clanking wheels spun out mile after mile of parallel bands of steel. The rails seemed to glow incandescently, as if brought to a white heat by the powerful rays of the sun. The distant horizon was vague, blurred, indistinct. The desert seemed to stretch away into the infinite.

Here and there clumps of cactus eked out a parlous existence. Occasionally little pyramids of rock came into vision. Seen through the shimmering heat waves, the telegraph poles and the rails, the cactus and the rock, were distorted, and seemed to dance grotesquely.

But to Cogas, sitting on the floor of the swaying platform, nothing was blurred. He saw all things clearly, and there was nothing so minute as to escape his keen-eyed observation.

He did not look upon the limitless stretch of desert as so many square miles of arid, profitless waste, to be crossed in a great hurry in a train. He did not see it with the eyes of gray-bearded prospectors, desert rats, who braved its terrors for the sake of their visions of gleaming yellow metal. He rejoiced in its heat—he had been cold so long.

So he sat, motionless, supremely happy, quietly contented. He was a prodigal returning home, undisturbed by doubt as to his reception. He knew! From the desert he had come—to the desert he was going back!

The train, civilization, the girl, Hewins, Big Tom, everything else, slipped into the limbo of forgotten things. He remembered only that he was Cogas, a child of the desert, and that he had been too long absent from the place which gave him birth.

Mechanically, almost unconsciously, he unbuttoned his uniform coat—the coat with the big brass buttons, of which he had been so proud — and flung it from him. Caught up in the breeze created by the speeding train, the garment hovered in the air for a few seconds, following in the wake of the train. It seemed to Cogas that it represented the evil spirit of civilization, which was loath to let him go.

One by one he discarded his other clothes until, naked as the desert would have her children, he jumped to his feet and capered about on the little platform, intoxicated with happiness. He did not hear the door of the car open and close behind him. He was not aware that Hewins—swaying uncertainly because of the motion of the car and the whisky he had been drinking—was watching him.

The face of the circus man betrayed a confusion of emotions — anger, mirth, amazement, and fear intermingling.

"What the hell do you think you're doin'?" he demanded thickly, as he lowered himself to a seat.

Cogas abruptly ceased his mad whirling, and, assuming a squatting position, looked up at Hewins's beet-red face, with its beady, snakelike eyes. For a time the little man forgot the desert and remembered the girl, Hewins, Big Tom, and the red-headed man who was murdered.

"Your clothes—where are they?" Hewins asked.

Cogas shrugged his shoulders and pointed back along the track.

"Do you mean to say," Hewins squealed, his face purple with anger, "that you threw them away?"

Cogas nodded.

Hewins opened his mouth, but anger held

him speechless. He raised his fist to strike, but, thinking better of it, let his hand fall harmless to his side.

"You see missy?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes."

"Do you know where she is?"

"Yes."

"Where is she?"

Again Cogas pointed back along the track.

"Missy go a long way back."

"What?" Hewins screamed, leaping to his feet. "Where did she go? What—"

"She went to Big Tom."

"Tom Armitage?" Hewins's flush left his face, and he looked deathly pale. "Go on, you black devil! What else do you know?"

He sensed that the Bushman was holding something back. Cogas looked at him steadily. Hewins tried to turn his head, tried to avoid the stare of the little man's black eyes.

Cogas slowly raised his right arm and pointed at Hewins.

"You killed Dowson," he said slowly. "Missy know. Missy go to tell man who take Big Tom. To-night men will come on train; they will take you."

Hewins tore at the collar band of his shirt. It was choking him. To his drink-befuddled brain there was no way of escape for him. Cogas knew everything. He was doomed!

He looked at the telegraph wires in terror. Even now an order might be going over them which would authorize some one to take him from the train and arrest him for murder.

"Yes," Cogas repeated. "Men will take you—you will die."

Hewins shrank away from the pointing finger.

"Are you a devil?" he whispered in awed tones. Then, in a whining, wheedling voice, he continued: "I'm your friend. I'll give you things. I'll—"

"Yes," Cogas assented. "You give me many things. You come with Cogas to the desert. There men no find you."

Hewins shivered and whimpered like a licked cur.

"Hide in the desert? But no man can live there, Cogas!"

"Cogas can. Cogas find water, find food. Cogas's friend live there, too."

Hewins thought quickly. Better than hiding in the desert, they would make for Mexico. He would be safe there, and it would be easy to get rid of the Bushman.

Cogas smiled sardonically.

"All right," said Hewins, not knowing the meaning of the Bushman's smile.

"Good! Pigface is wise. To-night big rain, big wind. When rain come, then we go. Pigface get little food, little drink. Cogas wait here."

Rising, Hewins left the platform and passed forward into the train. As he went, he made one final mental reservation. If the rain did not come, if Cogas's prophecy was a false one, then he would not go.

He accosted one of the brakemen, and questioned him as to the likelihood of a storm that night. The brakeman laughed.

"Storm? Here? I've heard all about that weather prophet of yours, but he pulled a boner this time. You don't know much, do you, fatty?" he said pityingly. "Why, if it rained here, snowballs would freeze in hell. Besides, it ain't the time of year for rain."

And, still chuckling at Hewins's question, he passed on.

But that night a storm burst suddenly upon the desert. The force of the wind threatened to blow the heavy train from the tracks. Lightning flashed incessantly, blinding in its brilliancy, and the ground vibrated to the heavy rolls of thunder. The rain beat upon the car windows with the force of hail.

Reassured, confident of the Bushman's ability to guide and preserve him during their stay in the desert, and forgetting his fear of the storm in the knowledge that escape from the vengeance of the law was now assured him, Hewins made his way to the back platform.

A few minutes later two dark forms dropped off the train and were engulfed in the hell of rain and darkness.

XI

All through the night they traveled fast, Hewins holding the Bushman's hand that he might not lose touch with him in the darkness. Again and again the white man—his big, gross body soft from years of evil living—would have rested.

"If stay, Pigface, men get you — you die," Cogas would tell him.

The warning kept him to his feet, and kept his feet moving, when every sinew of his body cried for rest. He was drenched to the skin. The heavy rain beat into his face with almost stunning force. He was miserable, acutely miserable, and afraid—afraid of the storm and the darkness, of the desert, of the motives of the Bushman, of the consequences of his own crime.

He was tortured by doubts and fears. How could any one know that he had killed Dowson? No one had seen him—he was sure of that; but Cogas had warned him that his crime was known, and that men were after him.

If the Bushman had told the truth, Hewins had been wise to leave the train and take a chance of escaping into the desert. Not much risk there! Cogas knew everything. There was something uncanny about the little man.

And then came another thought. Suppose the Bushman had lied to him, and had inveigled him into leaving the train, intent on losing him in the wilderness? Hewins knew of the strong bond which existed between Cogas and Armitage. He had tried in vain to break it. Then why should Cogas help his friend's enemy?

Instantly Hewins became panic-stricken. The Bushman had lied to him! No one suspected him of the murder; he was safe. He would go no farther. In the morning he would return to the railroad — *alone*. Cogas knew too much! He would make his way to—

At that moment an unusually vivid flash of lightning showed a small, dilapidated shack just a little to the right of them.

"Let's go there," Hewins panted, and turned toward it, meaning to seek its shelter until morning.

"No!" Cogas shouted shrilly. "No! Go there—die!"

He tugged at Hewins's hand, attempting to divert the white man from his course. With a curse, Hewins flung the Bushman from him, and quickened his step. He had gone only a few paces when he tripped—Cogas had caught him by the ankles—and fell heavily to the ground.

In a murderous frenzy he reached out into the darkness. His big hands came into contact with Cogas's naked body, and stealthily groped up until they closed about the little man's neck.

"No!" Cogas gasped. "No kill! Look!"

A brilliant ball of blue-white flame, blinding in its intensity, dropped with incredible rapidity from the darkness above. There was a loud crackling sound, like a volley of rifle fire. A pungent, sulphurous smell caused Hewins's nose to twitch as if he were about to sneeze. The shack burst into flame, blazed for a few moments, and then, in the lashing rain, went out with a protesting hiss.

The next lightning flash showed a smoldering ruin of timbers where the little building had stood.

"My God!" Hewins exclaimed in awed tones.

He felt suddenly nauseated. Death had come very near to him. He doubted Cogas no longer. Why should he? Had not the little man saved him from a certain and terrible death?

He uttered no expression of gratitude, however, for he had no such feeling. He concluded that the Bushman must have transferred to him the allegiance he had previously given to Armitage. He no longer feared the storm, or the desert. He was sure now that he would not be called to account for the murder of Dowson, for had not Cogas—this strange being who knew all nature's secrets—taken him under his protection?

And so, when Cogas jumped lightly to his feet and said, "Come!" Hewins rose ponderously, and, taking the Bushman's hand, silently resolved not to question the little man's judgment again.

The storm ceased as suddenly as it had begun. One last flash of lightning, a final roar of thunder, then the rain ceased and the clouds rolled away. The stars came out—millions of them—flooding the desert with a soft light. The warm earth began to breathe again, its breath was like the dense vapors that hover above a volcano's crater.

Cogas hurried on, forcing the big man to break into a lumbering trot. It seemed to Hewins that they must have traveled miles and miles. He felt that the desert heat was sapping his strength, that its vapors had entered his blood, melting his bones. It seemed to him that his head had swollen to gigantic proportions, and that its contents had dissolved into a seething effervescence.

His ears throbbed, and red lights flashed across his vision. Bulky objects loomed up directly in his path. He tried to check his pace, tried to go around them; but Cogas held him inexorably to his course, and he passed right through the supposed obstructions—which, as he now realized, were but phantoms conjured up by his imagination. He closed his eyes—it was easier than trying to see—and henceforth trusted entirely to the Bushman's guidance.

Events of the past flashed across his consciousness—a weird jumble of associations, a nightmare of evil. He smiled vacuously at the remembrance of some sneaking deed of his boyhood days, of the cruel tormenting of some animal. The smile became a chuckle when he thought of Armitage, imprisoned for the murder of Red Dowson.

"The fools!" he muttered. "*I* killed Red Dowson!"

Then his thoughts flew off at a tangent, and he tunelessly burst into the chorus of a ribald song. He was not capable of connected thought, save that he must not loose the Bushman's hand.

The sweat rolled off his face, and he reeled in his gait like a drunken man, lurching to the right and to the left, and dragging Cogas with him. After a while he stumbled and fell headlong, pulling his companion down with him.

"Good!" said Cogas. "No more walk. Sleep—sleep!"

Hewins grunted, and, still holding fast to the Bushman's wrist, turned over on his side. A few moments later he was snoring loudly.

Carefully Cogas released his wrist from the other man's grip. Then, sitting down close by, his knees drawn up, resting his chin on his hands, he stared out over the desert. Occasionally, as he filled his lungs with the dry air and found it good, he made the Little People's clicking noises of happiness.

The stars paled, and in the east the sky lightened. Pale bands of crimson, purple, and gold flecked the gray dawn. The colors changed momentarily, passing through all the shades, and then, as the sun shot above the horizon, they ceased to be. After that there was no more color, save that of the sun, and its golden glory seemed only to accentuate its terrific heat.

The white man still slept and snored, but Cogas rose to his feet. With hands upraised above his head, he stood for a moment, as if in reverent homage to the day's beginning.

Hewins stirred slightly and moaned. The rays of the sun were beating upon his head, boring into his brain.

Stooping, Cogas placed Hewins's hat so that it cast some modicum of shade across the white man's face. Then, running swiftly, he vanished behind a clump of cactus.

XII

When Hewins awoke, ten minutes later, the fact that he was in the desert, and alone, did not at first penetrate his consciousness. His eyes were bloodshot, his eyelids were puffed and swollen, his head throbbed painfully, and every muscle of his body ached. Wearily he passed his hands across his face.

"Cogas!" he screamed. "Cogas, you black devil, where are you?"

But there was no reply.

He stared wildly about him, but saw only the heat waves dancing above the dazzling white of the desert floor. Nothing else seemed to be moving.

He rose to his feet, horribly afraid, and called again:

"Cogas! Cogas!"

His voice was the only sound in that wilderness of waste. It sounded tinny, it had no resonance.

He ran a few paces, stopped, retraced his footsteps, and started off again in another direction, shouting at intervals, cursing, pleading, almost weeping with rage. Suddenly he collapsed like a pricked bubble, and lay on the burning ground, burying his face in his arms.

Then he remembered that he was hungry and thirsty and had the means of satisfying himself. This cheered him a little. Sitting up, he opened the satchel which was slung about his shoulders. It contained sandwiches and a flask of whisky. He ate wolfishly, washing down each bite with a swig from the flask.

At last all was gone, both food and drink; but his thirst was still unquenched, and his fears returned to him with renewed force. He tried to reason out his position, endeavoring to gauge the direction in which they had traveled during the night, and the direction in which he must travel in order to return to the railroad—for that he was resolved to do.

All the doubts of yesternight returned to him. He was sure now that the Bushman had purposely led him into the desert, and had deserted him, thinking to revenge the imprisonment of Big Tom Armitage.

Should he go to the west or to the north? He did not know. And which *was* west, and which north? He did not know. He had no compass, and the sun was no help to him. Perhaps, later on, he could tell; but then it would be too late.

He closed his eyes, seeking relief from the glaring whiteness. When he opened them again, Cogas was standing beside him. So great was his relief that he forgot to curse, forgot to beat the Bushman, as he had first threatened to do. He could only gasp:

"Where have you been?"

Cogas grinned.

"Pigface thirsty—Cogas thirsty," he replied, with an expressive gesture which took in the whole desert. "Cogas go find water. Cogas find. Cogas come back to Pigface. Pigface had long sleep."

Water! Hewins face lighted up, and he moistened his lips with his tongue.

"Let's go," he said. "Is it near?"

"No—long way. When sun there"—he indicated a position low down in the sky, just above the horizon—"then we go find water."

"That 'll be nearly sunset," Hewins muttered. "Ten long, hot hours! I can't stick it that long. God!" Then he turned on Cogas. "But you've been to the water and back in a little time, you black—"

"No," the Bushman interposed. "Cogas no go to water, Pigface. Cogas go a little way there, a little way there, and a little way there." He pointed to the north and to the east and to the west. "Then Cogas could smell the water, he did not see it. It is a long way. You see it when sun nearly go."

The little Bushman looked down encouragingly at the white man. Then, seeing the empty satchel and flask, he shook his head reprovingly.

"Bad!" he said. "By an' by Pigface hungry, thirsty. Now we must walk—no rest— Come!"

He picked up the flask and walked away. Grumblingly, and not a little dazed, Hewins rose and followed the little man, who marched solemnly just ahead of him.

The desert seemed to have rejuvenated Cogas. Naked though he was, he seemed unconscious of the heat of the burning sand. To Hewins each step was a torture. The heat burned through his thick-soled shoes, and his feet felt as if the skin had been scalded off them.

Once they saw two men on horseback, not half a mile distant. Hewins would have run toward them, would have shouted to them, and took off his coat, intending to signal to them with it; but Cogas stopped him.

"No, Pigface," he said, and dragged the white man down behind a pile of rocks. "Men there looking for Pigface. If see, they take Pigface, and Pigface will die. We stay here. When they go, then we go."

And Hewins, shivering as he realized how close he had come to giving himself away—he did not dare to question Cogas's word—crouched down low and spoke in hushed whispers.

"We go now," Cogas said presently, and once more they took up the weary trail.

Time ceased to mean anything to Hewins. He felt as if he had been walking since the world's beginning, and would continue to walk until the world's end. One hundred yards, two, three, four, meant nothing. For all the progress they made, as far as Hewins could see, they might have been chained to a gigantic treadmill; and the steps of that treadmill were white-hot!

"Let me go first," he said, after a long silence. His voice was as hoarse as the croaking of a frog. "You walk too fast!"

Cogas dropped behind, first indicating to Hewins the direction in which he must travel.

On they went—much more slowly now, for Hewins was almost spent. His cheeks were hollow. His eyes, sunken into their sockets, were glazed and staring. He was covered from head to foot with the white dust of the desert.

The sun was directly overhead, and its rays beat upon him mercilessly. He wanted tc rest—never to move again—but the instinct to preserve life was strong and drove him on. He dared not rest, for he must get to water before sundown.

That was the thing which urged him on —water! What a fool he had been to drink the whisky! Water was what he wanted.

He walked with head bent, not daring to look up, for then he saw the desert in all its vastness, and it terrified him.

Then, when he did look up, he saw to his left a shady grove, in the center of which a fountain played. Shouting hoarsely, he ran toward it, ignoring the Bushman's warning cries.

"No! No!" shouted Cogas.

Hewins struggled and hit out violently when the Bushman caught him by the waist and held on. Then, suddenly, the grove vanished, and there was nothing but the white dust. Again he turned savagely on his guide.

"Why did you stop me?" he screamed. "There was water! I—"

"No water—only a desert lie," said Cogas gravely. He pointed to the west. "That way we go, Pigface."

Hewins said no more, but silently took up the trail. He was frightened, fearing that he was losing control of his senses. He stumbled frequently. Again and again his hands went up to his neck, as if to unloose a pressure about his throat. He cried aloud in terror, like a child whose sleep is disturbed by a nightmare.

Then he would chuckle grimly as he thought of Armitage in prison.

"But it was me killed Dowson! I killed Red Dowson!"

His course was an erratic one. He zigzagged back and forth. He traveled in a wide circle, but was not aware of it. Twice, within a space of ten minutes, he crossed the gleaming steel lines of the railroad tracks, but did not see them.

Every little while he would call back to Cogas:

"Am I on the right trail? Am I going straight?"

If the Bushman vouchsafed any reply, Hewins did not hear it. After a while he ceased to think. He became merely a piece of clumsy machinery lacking a guiding hand; and at last the machinery broke down utterly. He stumbled and fell headlong to the ground.

The fall stunned him. For a time he did not move, and then only because Cogas shook him into consciousness.

"Go away! I'm tired," Hewins whined. "I want to go to sleep. I hope to God I never wake up!"

"No, Pigface—no sleep. If sleep, no get water—die!"

"I was a fool to come with you," Hewins continued. "I ought to have chanced my luck—it's always been good. Even the chair wouldn't have been as bad as this hell. No food, no water, no sleep—nothing save the blasted sand and heat! You black, grinning devil, did you plan this?"

He struck savagely at Cogas, but, although the Bushman appeared not to move, the blow missed him entirely.

"I didn't mean that, Cogas," Hewins said. "We're friends, ain't we? God, but I'm thirsty!"

His eyes filled with self-pitying tears.

"We go now," Cogas said gravely. "We stay here too long. We run, we get water before sun go."

Hewins laughed sarcastically.

"Run! I can't walk!"

Nevertheless he rose slowly to his feet and set off again; but he had only gone a few paces when he fell once more, cursing, sobbing hysterically.

Cogas watched him contemptuously for a while. When the sobbing and cursing ceased, to be replaced by loud snores, he squatted down on the ground near the fallen man and waited patiently.

XIII

A LITTLE before sunset Hewins stirred and moaned fitfully. Cogas rose and stood over him. For a while he regarded him intently; then, satisfied with what he saw, he ran with a swift, doglike lope to a ledge of rock some three hundred yards away. At the foot of the ledge was a small rocky basin half filled with water.

He filled the flask, and, returning to Hewins, moistened the white man's lips.

Hewins, awakening from a dream of green fields and rippling streams, grabbed at the flask, and would have drained it, had not Cogas taken it from him.

"Give it to me, you black devil!" Hewins said thickly.

"Only a little now, Pigface. Did you kill Redhead?"

"Yes, blast you!"

Cogas leaned forward and looked full into the eyes of the self-confessed murderer.

"Pigface must not forget that," he said. "Listen! Pigface has done many bad things, so Pigface must pay. Pigface must not forget that he killed Red Dowson. If he does, Cogas will make the desert curse!"

He held out his right hand, pointing it at Hewins, and making the curse sign of all primitive people, with the fist clenched, all but the thumb and little finger — the horned curse, the curse of the devil.

Hewins recoiled.

"I will not forget," he said; "but you will give me water?"

Cogas handed him the flask.

"Ah! That's better," Hewins sighed. "But—"

"Look, Pigface!"

Cogas pointed toward the setting sun, where, silhouetted against the crimson glow, rose a water tower, with a group of shacks clustered about its base. For a long time Hewins could not see it. Then, with a hoarse croak of joy, he rose to his feet and staggered a few paces in that direction.

"Not now!" Cogas cried. "Wait, Pigface! There men wait who will take you. Stay! Cogas will show you much water, much food."

But Hewins kept doggedly on.

"Wait, Pigface!" cried Cogas, running after him. "When sun go, you go. There will be a light."

Muttering incoherent words, Hewins slowly lowered himself to the ground, sitting where he could see the water tower; and, as he waited, Cogas spoke of many things—of the beauty of the desert, and how a man could hide there for many years and be seen by no one.

"I take you," Cogas said, "and you live. Go there"—he pointed to the water tower—"and you die!"

But Hewins did not hear him. He saw only the water tower.

The sun set. Darkness came, and lights twinkled in the windows of the shacks at the foot of the tower.

Rising to his feet as one under the influence of a drug, or of some hypnotic spell, the presence of the Bushman totally forgotten, Hewins set out. His staring eyes were fixed on the distant pin points of light, as if he feared lest they might vanish, should he for one second turn his head.

On he went, stumbling, falling, rising again, and breaking into a run, only to slow up almost immediately, gasping for breath.

Hewins thought he was alone—alone in a thick, murky darkness—and yet he heard voices. They sounded all about him. Now they were ahead of him, now behind, to the right, to the left. He reasoned that they were but figments of his imagination.

"I killed Red Dowson!" the voice ahead shouted.

After a few minutes the voice behind echoed:

"I killed Red Dowson!"

He seemed to be closed in on all sides by darkness and the voices; but he staggered on. The lights ahead seemed to dance in the darkness. On he went, lurching and swaying, his head bent forward, his eyes protruding from their sockets.

And now the voices kept time to the tread of his feet:

"I—killed—Red—Dowson!"

"I—killed—Red—Dowson!"

The words took possession of him, infuriated him, hammered at his brain, seeking entrance. His eyes smarted, his head throbbed.

At last he seemed to realize what the voices expected of him, and he began to whisper the words, softly at first, getting louder with each repetition:

"I killed Red Dowson!

"*I killed Red Dowson!*

"I—KILLED—RED—DOWSON!"

Shouting this over and over again, he came at last to the water tower and the shacks huddled about it. He would have gone on, past tower and shacks, on into the desert beyond. He seemed to be carried along by the sound waves of his voice. His body did not exist—he was only a voice, alone in a world of nothingness.

Men came running out of the shacks and stopped him. He struggled hard to get away from them, but they held him fast, and, carrying him into one of the shacks, undressed him and put him to bed.

His shouts grew fainter now. They were only a hoarse croak. They became merely an indistinct muttering, which died away into silence; but still his lips moved, forming the words:

"I killed Red Dowson!"

His eyes were wide open. He could not close them, and he tossed restlessly upon the bed.

"He must be off that circus train," whispered one of the men; "but who's this Red Dowson he's got on his mind?"

"Red Dowson!" chimed in one of the others. "That's the name of the chap who was murdered up at Barstowe the other day. They say they got the man who did it, but I don't believe he's guilty, for all the case looks black against him. His name's Armitage."

"I killed Red Dowson!" repeated the voice from the bed, in a ghostly whisper.

"He wants to tell us all about it, poor devil! Better take it down, Shorty, and we'll sign it all proper. All right, old-timer, we'll listen. Tell us, how did you kill Red Dowson?"

And Hewins told. The words burst from him like waters released from a dam.

"It was Cogas that found out," he concluded. "Cogas, the little man. He knows everything. He's a devil! He's out there now, naked in the desert, waiting for me. Don't let him come in! Don't!"

The murderer's voice rose to a scream.

One of the men went to the door and looked out. He thought he saw a shadow—a grotesque, capering shadow—pass into the darkness. He thought he heard a low, happy chuckle; but he shut the door carefully, and—it doesn't do to encourage fancies in the desert—said reassuringly:

"There's no one there, old-timer. You've been dreaming!"

Hewins shook his head.

"No—I didn't dream. You're sure he's not there, and you won't let him in?"

"Sure!"

Satisfied at last, Hewins slept. When he awoke, sixteen hours later, a sheriff was sitting by his bed.

XIV

Cogas had followed Hewins right up to the water tank, had seen the men take him into the shack, and had heard him tell them of the murder.

That done, conscious that he had succeeded in doing just what missy said had to be done in order that Big Tom might go free—and surely no professor of psychology could have planned it better—the little Bushman lingered no longer, but sped swiftly from the place.

He was the shadow the man had seen. He uttered the chuckle the man had heard; but now—

Straight across the desert he ran, as straight as a bullet from a gun. Not once did he deviate from his course. He had no landmark, and needed none. Neither did he take his bearings from the stars; yet a man with compass and surveying instruments could not have followed a straighter line.

The Bushman had something within him that was a better guide than all man-made instruments. Animals, if they have not been too long in the service of man, have that same something within them, but not so well developed as in Cogas. A carrier pigeon could not have been surer of its route than the little Bushman was.

He seemed tireless. His speed never slackened. At times he leaped high into the air and shouted gleefully.

He crossed and recrossed the railroad tracks, for they turned and twisted like gigantic snakes. Once he was caught in the brilliant glare of the headlight of an approaching locomotive, and he stood for a moment filled with a strange terror—but only for a moment.

"My God, Bill! Did you see that?" the fireman exclaimed excitedly, as Cogas vanished like a shadow from the area illumined by the headlight.

"See what?" the engineer growled.

"That man on the track—a little man. I thought it was a kid, at first, but it was a man, all right. He was naked—hadn't a stitch on him. Must be a wild man or—what do you think, Bill?"

"Think you'd better watch your water gauge, that's what I think. Then you wouldn't be seeing things that ain't!"

The fireman laughed, but did not press the matter. He *knew* what he had seen, and it would be something to talk about at the end of the run.

The rising sun found Cogas still following his trail. His body was covered with white dust, but his legs were moving with machinelike regularity, and his stride was effortless. About noon he came to a large cluster of rocks, which marked a water hole. Here he threw water over himself, drank a little, and then curled up in a ball and slept soundly.

Three hours later he was on his way again. An old prospector, seeing a strange figure silhouetted against the sky line, rubbed his eyes, swore off hard liquor for good, and hastened to the water hole. There he tried to solve the mystery of the Bushman's trail; but the small size of the footprints, and the fact that they were made by naked feet, puzzled him hopelessly. It was something entirely beyond his comprehension.

"Must have been a fairy!" he guffawed.

By sunset Cogas came to the outskirts of the little town of Barstowe. There he waited in hiding until darkness should enable him to complete his journey with some degree of security. The Bushman had learned, from past experience, that it was not wise to go where white men congregate as he was now—naked, as the desert would have her children.

So he waited patiently until the darkness came; and then he stealthily entered the town, slinking along in the shadows.

After some searching about, he found a small stone building, with windows and doors heavily barred. Two men with rifles in their hands sat on the stone steps, smoking lazily.

Cogas cautiously worked his way around to the back of the jail. Here, with a catlike leap, he caught and held on to the iron grating of a cell window, hung there limp for a moment, and then, pulling himself up, squatted on the narrow ledge.

"Big Tom!" he called softly through the grating. "Big Tom!"

Some one in the cell stirred uneasily.

"Who's there?" Tom Armitage's voice inquired, and then added, with a choke: "Cogas! How did you get here? I thought you had—"

The prisoner rose from his bench, and, coming to the window, looked up into the Bushman's grinning face.

"I come from the desert," Cogas said. "Pigface and Cogas alone in desert. No water, no food. Pigface go — tell white men *he* killed Redhead."

"What? You mean—"

Armitage could hardly take it all in. He wanted to believe, yet dared not.

"It is true, Big Tom. Soon—to-morrow, maybe—missy come. She tell. Men come and tell Big Tom go."

Just then several men on horseback rode up to the door. There followed the sound of voices exchanging banter, curses, and a man's sullen denials.

"That is Pigface," whispered Cogas.

There was a great to-do of unlocking doors. Many footsteps sounded on the flag floor of the jail. The door of the cell next to Armitage's was opened, and some one was thrust forcibly into it.

Then the men came to Armitage's cell. It was the sheriff and his two deputies.

"Say, Armitage—" the sheriff began.

"Wait!" he interposed. "I know what you're going to say. That's Hewins in the next cell, and he's confessed that he murdered Dowson—is that right?"

"It sure is, but it beats all hell how you knew! Mary, she's down at the judge's getting an order from him. She'll be up here pretty soon. How did you know? You must be one of these here—now—claryvoyants!"

Armitage smiled.

"No, not that exactly; but I've got the best and truest little partner that man ever had!"

"You mean some one else besides the girl?"

"Yes."

"Then what's his name? I'd sure admire to meet him!"

"Well," Armitage said slowly, "down at the circus the other night you all yelled 'Fake!' when you saw him; but he's no fake. His name is Cogas — Cogas, the Bushman."

From the perch on the window sill sounded the little clicking noises of happiness.

THE END

THE SECRET

Can you keep joy hid,
Like myrrh beneath a golden lid—
A sweetness at your heart concealed,
Hallowed, hushed, and unrevealed?

Then some day I shall tell a thing
To turn old winter back to spring!
Oh, but 'tis a secret fair,
That dies if published on the air;
Speak it, 'tis gone—
Share it, 'tis none!

'Tis trembling on my lip to tell,
Were I but sure that you would guard it well.
In a place of snows
And the budding rose,
If I confide it,
There will you hide it
And then give the key
Only to me?

Bruce Barber

The Bullfighter

A ROMANCE OF THE THRILLING SPORT OF THE ARENA

By T. S. Stribling

Author of "Birthright," "East Is East," etc.

ON the west side of Candelaria Plaza, which lies in the eastern purlieus of Caracas, the capital of Venezuela, there squats an old wine shop owned by one Pamba Malestar. This shop and its owner exert rather a large influence in starting the great, or, at least, the famous, in Venezuela. To mention a few of the *diestros* who have emerged from this old wine-scented chrysalis into fame, there are Rosalito, Conchito, Juanito, and so on, "ito" after "ito"—to say nothing of Lubito, who wielded his rapier to such an effect that he captured for himself in the Orinoco region a dictatorship about the size of England, Belgium, and France lumped together.

The inside of Señor Malestar's shop is cool, gloomy, and, of course, properly dusty, as all wine shops should be, in order that any beam of light straying out of the *patio* into the interior must pick out a bloom of dust on ancient bottles before it flares up in their ruby or amber hearts.

A multiplicity of old tables, both square and round, and blackened by years and liquor stains, are spaced among the square brick pillars which support the ceiling. Time and custom have divided the territory of the tables into very distinct sections. The coolest is reserved for the old *aficionados* — that is, Venezuelans rich or poor whose lifelong interest in, fidelity to, and unceasing conversation about the great art of tauromachy entitles them to a seat among the doctors.

The second honorable position is over near the *patio*, where the sippers of glasses can look out on a dilapidated pavement of red brick and a great flare of bougainvillea. The gorgeous vine rides the wall in a purple curve. Among its profusion of blooms a tropical butterfly occasionally wanders, and, in very rare instances, flickers down on the very wineglasses themselves, unrolls its long tube, and drinks with the *toreros*—to their health, no doubt.

This space of tables is reserved for the *diestros*, the *espadas*, the *banderilleros*, the attendants of the bull ring. No one ever questioned the right of these men of the *circo* to seats giving on the *patio*, with its sweet flowers and sunshine and its jeweled lizards and butterflies. It was highly fit that they should absorb, while they could, the movement and color and sweetness of life—these men whose own lives, one day, will most probably flicker out, pinned to the sand by a bull's horn, while ten thousand crazy spectators banked in the oval gasp and shriek.

The remainder of the expanse of tables is given over to the *gente*—that is to say, the mob, *hoi polloi*, the sons and daughters of nobody.

On this particular afternoon a certain stir in the wine shop was occasioned by old Malestar pasting a new folder against the dusty mirror of his bar, and laying a few more on his counter, ready to the hands of his patrons. A group of dignified and leathery old gentlemen in the remote and coolest part of the house immediately beckoned a *criado* to fetch some of the folders. Soon their endless gossip took on an explosive quality. They leaned over the tables and stressed their words with clenched fists. One of them hissed:

"But, *señor*, he breaks all precedents, Juan Leon! Why not Leonito? Has he no consideration for the lungs of the *aficionados!* How can one shout 'Juan Leon! Juan Leon!' Impossible!"

"But no, *señor!* It is the new style in Spain—dignity, simplicity. Why call himself 'Little John,' or 'Little Lion'? Why not simply John Lion?"

"But that is not his real name!"

"*Quien sabe?*"

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Another member of the group thumped on the folder and disputed the printed text.

"How can his cape play be more perfect than that of Orlandito? That *hombre* was a shadow, incomparable. I tell you I saw him get the *cogida* that killed him."

"And he perfect?" interposed a third voice ironically.

"The bull made a false charge."

"A thoroughbred Spanish fighting bull made a false charge?"

A pause, then a shrug, a spreading of the hands.

"They say he beat his wife unduly, *señor*. He was an artist, you know, and had temperament. I have always thought it was the finger of Him Who Moves Us All that reached down into the *circo*—and lo, an impossibility! A Spanish fighting bull charges falsely! A wife is avenged! Say what you will, *señors*, such an interposition was not lost on Guillermo Sandoval. I have been more regular at the masses since I saw Orlandito go down."

A moment of reverent silence followed this confession of faith. Then a practical voice said:

"We would all better see Malestar and reserve our seats now. Juan Leon and his fighting bulls—the *circo* will be packed!"

Several of the old men nodded meditatively; others sipped their wine; others looked dreamily at old Malestar, far across the wine shop, behind his bar. Yes, decidedly, seats must be procured without a moment's delay. All agreed to that, and they drifted into their endless gossip again.

Over near the *patio* silhouetted against the purple bougainvillea sat a youth of powerful mold and rather handsome dark features. He, too, sat perusing the new poster on the filmed mirror over the bar, and he compared it in growing displeasure with an old hand sheet which had been stuck there for a long time.

The athletic young man read the new placard slowly, his lips fashioning each word without sound, after the manner of semiliterate folk:

> Señor Morear, touring the South American capitals with a herd of Spanish fighting bulls, wishes to present to the citizens of Caracas
>
> JUAN LEON
>
> premier *espada* of the Circo Imperial in Madrid,
> at the Nuevo Circo on August 15.
> Six Spanish bulls will be used.
>
> Admission, Bs. 100, Bs. 80, Bs. 40, Bs. 20.
> Reservations now on sale.

Then followed press notices from the sporting papers of Madrid, Cordova, Seville, Barcelona. These were limited to catch phrases, followed by the signature of the paper:

"Perfection of art"—"A continuous picture, graceful as sculpture, flexible as scandal"—"Juan Leon, who has translated the prose of bullfighting into the poetry of tauromachy"—and so on for half a dozen ingeniously turned paragraphs.

The old poster, which had been stuck on the mirror for a long time, was a badly printed sheet in two colors. It represented a man with a brilliant red cape standing the charge of a huge red and black bull, which blew red streams from its nostrils. Above and below this picture was displayed the following text:

> Angelito! Angelito! Angelito!
> The Unspeakable, the Incomparable, the Supernal! Will kill seven ferocious bulls in the Nuevo Circo Sunday afternoon at two o'clock. A thrilling exhibition of the most reckless courage and the most consummate skill. Do not fail to see the Daredevil Angelito!
> Angelito! Angelito! Angelito!
> Admission, Bs. 3, Bs. 2.50, Bs. 2, Bs. 1.

There were no press notices.

There had been a time when that villainous poster struck a chord of music in the broad breast of the young man who perused it; but to-day, in juxtaposition with the new notice, there was something wrong with it—the athlete hardly knew what. He stared at it with pained eyes, moving his lips to the familiar words, but he could not for his life put his finger precisely on the weakness which he felt to be there.

"Now by San Pablo," he thought gloomily, "that is a strange thing! Here this Juan Leon has no big words, no red type, no exclamation points, and yet somehow—somehow—"

He tapped his fingers on the table, utterly puzzled to guess how the Spanish poster obtained its effect of dignity and sincerity, which his own so signally lacked. For naturally the young man who sat tattooing on the table top was Angelito, billed to kill seven ferocious bulls in the Nuevo Circo on Sunday afternoon at two o'clock. The reason the old poster set no date for this daredevil feat was because Angelito performed it every Sunday afternoon at two o'clock.

As Angelito criticized his own placard, there entered the wine shop one of those slender, handsome, and somewhat melancholy-looking young Venezuelans who lounge in every club in Caracas. This one loitered into the door, glanced over the interior, and presently threaded his way toward the section reserved for bullfighters, with an air of one possessing an immense but saddened leisure.

He smiled faintly at the *torero* as he came up, and a moment later leaned over him in a perfunctory embrace. Then he slipped into a chair on the other side of the table, with a slight shrug and a down-drawing of his handsome red lips which meant that perhaps, after all, he and the bullfighter might as well go on living, there being little else to do.

After the usual polite inquiries about their respective health, the *torero*, using the intimate Spanish "*tu*," asked:

"Have you read the notice of the coming *circo*, Rafael?"

Rafael wagged a negative finger, and, using the formal "*usted*," replied:

"Kind of you to mention it, but that no longer interests me, Angelito."

The bullfighter stared.

"What? Not interested in the Spanish *circo?*"

"*Absolutamente no.*"

Rafael held up both palms and dropped them.

"*Pero porqué?* Why, *mi caro amigo?*"

"I cannot speak of it, dear Angelito."

"*Pobrecito*—poor little one! What has happened?"

"You know my mother had always forbid my spreading a cape before a bull, even a *novillo*—a young bull."

"*Sí,*" admitted Angelito, with a little shrug; "but you have always done it when you liked."

"*Seguramente,* but the treacherousness of women! Ah, Angelito!"

"What have they done now?" asked the bullfighter in amazement.

"What should my mother do," cried Rafael, "but go to my *inamorata*, the exquisite Señorita Margarita Miraflores, and together they plan this coup. I am not even to play at the *novilladas*—the fights with young bulls. I am tied, pinioned, bound by my word as a *caballero!*"

"*Por l'amor de Dios!*" cried Angelito. "How did they do it?"

"Wait! Stay!" cried Rafael. "I have here a little verse that says it better than I can. I spent all last night composing it, after I came back from the window of the Señorita Miraflores. I call it '*Espada, Adios*'—'Farewell, My Sword.'"

With a trembling hand the young man drew from an inner pocket a sheet of parchment rolled in silk. The mere unrolling perfumed the air about the table. When it was uncovered, there appeared on the sheepskin a poem engrossed with rubric capitals in the most painstaking manner.

Rafael leaned across the table, poised his right hand to be ready for his gestures, and recited thus:

"The night was yearning, tumultuous,
And I could not discern in my passion
The breath of the sad frangipani
From the maddening scent of her tresses—
Implacable, insolent tresses
That coil as an aspic colubrian
Benumbing the will and the vigor
And the masculine surge of the heartbeat.

"I forswore what was highest within me,
The flare of the yellow arena,
The lunge of black lethal horns,
And the delicate crimson cloak play
That wafts aside death, enigmatic.

"Oh, *espada,* the Cristo of Spaniards,
Whose hilt is a cross and is sacred!
Oh, could I forget and forswear thee,
Bound in a pair of weak arms
To the jealous bars of her window,
Ensnared in a coil of curls,
Of aspic, colubrian tresses?

"But I will awake from the spell,
Oh, *espada,* the Cristo of Spaniards!
I will awake and will see
For what I have bartered thy slimness;
The *padre* will break down the bars,
With a mumbling of words and a blessing,
And *crac!* Then I will awake
To a fat wife and four squalling babies!"

At this point Rafael flung down his poem and broke into ironic laughter. "I don't understand it!" he cried. "By San Pedro, it escapes me!"

The bullfighter stared at his friend blankly. "Neither do I. What does it mean?"

"What does what mean?"

"*Pues,* the poem."

Rafael became gloomily sober again.

"The poem! Oh, that means that my mother and sister went to the Señorita Miraflores and persuaded her to make me promise never to fight another bull. That's what the poem means."

"Did you promise it?"

"*Sangre de Cristo, hombre,* of course I promised it!"

The bullfighter and his friend sat silent in the face of this calamity. Angelito looked out into the *patio*. He watched a green lizard make a dart across the red brick pavement, then stop amid its flight to jiggle up and down on its tiny forelegs, after the absurd manner of its kind.

A shuffling near his table caused him to glance around, and he saw old Malestar approaching. The old fellow was nut brown, wrinkled and humped. He wore nothing on his feet except the *alpargatas* of a peasant, although he owned the famous wine shop, was the impresario and dictator of all the bullfights in Venezuela, and must have been a millionaire in bolivars, at least.

Now he came up rubbing his hands exactly like an ordinary waiter, and saying:

"I hope you like your drinks, *señors. Beber es vivir*"—to drink is to live. He chuckled over the worn Spanish. "Señor Angelito," he added, "may I drop a word in your ear?"

Rafael immediately arose.

"I was just going, *tio*. If you will pardon me, Angelito—"

He was about to bow himself away; but the bullfighter, annoyed out of his gloss of suavity, made a rough gesture and said:

"No, stay where you are, Rafael! Tio Malestar, we are *amigos*. You may say anything before Rafael!"

Rafael's oval olive face betrayed the faintest surprise at this outburst, but he lingered a moment, evidently a little undecided what to do. The old wine seller took a second glance at Angelito, to make sure that the *torero* was not intoxicated. Then he said, with a little gesture of complaisance:

"It is a slight thing, *señors*. I have just received a telegram from the *alcalde* of Valencia asking for a *quadrillo*. He makes a *fiesta* to-morrow in honor of San Blas, and he desires a *representación*"—a bull fight. "The fight will take place directly after high mass; so if any fighter cares to accept the purse, he may return on the afternoon train, God willing."

The old man crossed himself.

At this announcement the bullfighter was sorry that he had not allowed Rafael to depart. He wanted to ask about the size of the purse, but that was impossible before a member of the wealthy Jiminez family.

Old Malestar had foreseen this difficulty. He cleared his throat and said:

"It is a great *fiesta, señor*. The bishop himself is going to administer the holy sacrament to a class of novices, and naturally they desire a very sharp and bloody *corrida*. There will be much—er—much fame."

The *torero* was so uncomfortable before Rafael that he did not understand this substitution of "fame" for "money." He was about to reject the offer when Rafael leaned across the table.

"Take it," he counseled briefly.

"*Porqué?*" cried Angelito, a little alarmed for fear that Rafael thought he was poor, and needed the purse, whatever it was.

"Because," explained Rafael, a light coming into his handsome face, "I am going with you as second *espada!*"

Both the old man and the bullfighter stared at this youth, who, as both knew, had never fought anything except *novillos*—young bulls—in his life.

"*Por Dios,* Señor Jiminez!" cried old Malestar, with horror in his face. "*Es imposible!* A Jiminez fighting in a public *corrida!*"

"I will not fight as a Jiminez. I will go unknown!"

Rafael gave this last word a romantic intonation.

"But the purse is nothing!" cried the shopkeeper, seizing this chance to interpolate the information. "A paltry fifteen hundred bolivars!"

The *novillero* made a gesture which expressed disdain of the purse.

"Keep that for yourself, *tio*."

Old Malestar was visibly overcome.

"*Demonio*, what a man!"

Angelito was ashamed of the old shopkeeper's outburst over money. It somehow reflected on his own generosity.

"But, Rafael," expostulated the bullfighter, "you have given your *fiancée* your word as a *caballero*—"

The young man shrugged politely, as if arguing with the girl herself.

"I will fight under a pseudonym. She will never know of it."

"But you promised her! You pledged yourself as a Jiminez!"

Rafael turned on his friend in amazement. "*Sangre de Cristo!* The promises a man makes to a woman are for her peace of mind, Angelito. They are made to comfort her, to protect her. They are expressions of immediate love and tenderness, not guides of future conduct."

"God listen to you!" exclaimed Angelito, who had never had occasion to take this aristocratic view of pledges to women.

"*Seguramente*," continued Rafael, turning to the old man, "I did give my promise, Tio Malestar, and it was a bitter renunciation." Rafael became grave at the recollection. "I think I may say, *tio*, it caused me more pain than I have felt since the burial of my father, God rest his soul!" The three men crossed themselves reverently. "To give up my sword, the color of my life, my slender virgin of death! Ah, *tio*, that was a great pain!"

"*Caramba, sí*," hissed the wine seller, much impressed.

"But, *tio*, like all great sorrows, it reacted on my heart, and, if I may say it, inspired one of my loftiest songs. Here, listen! I call it '*Espada, Adios!*'"

Rafael drew the old man toward him nervously, got out his parchment, and unrolled the silk. As the perfume floated into air once more, old Uncle Malestar sniffed noisily, blinked his eyes, and stuck out his tongue at Angelito, to denote satisfaction in the odor.

The bullfighter grew hot under his sallow skin. Such grossness in the old shopkeeper in some mysterious way reflected on himself. He thought with savagery:

"May God's lightning strike this old monkey!"

By this time Rafael was well launched on his poem, reading it dramatically. Old Malestar picked up the manuscript cover from the table, pressed it to his wide nostrils, and stood inhaling, and presumably listening, with his eyes shut.

The reading over, the shopkeeper shook hands effusively with the poet. As the two young men prepared to go, young Jiminez said that he would be forced to beg a favor of Angelito. He wanted the bullfighter to go to the Jiminez villa and fetch his rapier, cloak, brocaded jacket, sash, and trousers.

"Because," he explained, "if my sister and mother so much as see me lift the corner of my cape, they begin weeping and warning and begging, and I have really a devil of a time."

"Will they give them to me to bring to you?"

"Tell them you are a *novillero*, and I am lending you my things for a try-out. I'll give you a note."

Rafael stopped outside the wine shop, produced a memorandum book and a gold magazine pencil, and scribbled a sheet.

"That will do it. Just drive around with all my things to your own *casa*, and we will start from there in the morning."

The *torero* took the note with a certain pleasure in being dispatched in this intimate fashion to the Jiminez villa. He hailed a cab, and the two friends waved *adios* to each other as Angelito drove off.

The swaying of the cab over the cobblestones was grateful to the *torero*. As a Latin, he had a childlike enjoyment of his immediate physical pleasures. Now and then he saw the cabman above him lift a hand to his cap. By this Angelito knew that they were passing a church, and he mechanically touched the brim of his own expensive hat.

Presently he began planning what he would say when he reached the Jiminez villa. He drew out a case of cork-tipped cigarettes, lighted one thoughtfully, and looked at the end to see if it were burning evenly.

"Pardon me, *señorita*, for intruding on your charming leisure," he would say.

It really seemed quite graceful and easy. Of course, some of the effect would depend on how he said it.

II

PARAISO is in Caracas what the Gold Coast is in Chicago and Fifth Avenue is in New York. Except in Paraiso, all the villas are surrounded by grounds which look as green and exotic as hothouses. The buildings themselves are painted in the brightest of blues and yellows and greens, to keep in tone with the quiver of sunshine amid palms, bamboos, banyans, and the shrill red of the poinsettias.

Angelito got out of his cab and told the driver to wait. The stone pillars of the Jiminez gate and the tall iron bars of the fence had an imposing effect. The *torero* was not accustomed to ornamental grounds. Except in Paraiso, all the houses of Caracas are built solidly together along the *calles*; and these inclosures lush with greenery breathed an opulence that was strange to him.

He thought over his sentence a little dubiously.

"Intruding on your charming leisure—"

He moistened his red lips as he opened the great gate, with its iron bars pointing like spears to heaven. It seemed a long walk from the gate to the front door of the villa. Once there, he pressed the button and got out his note hurriedly. Then he stood staring at the door, holding his note in readiness, like a delivery boy.

He had to ring three times. He stood in a curious suspense when at last he heard a shuffling inside, and a mulatto maid opened the door. Angelito was greatly relieved to see that it was the maid who answered the bell, and he handed her the note in silence.

The girl looked up, and her mind evidently decided some point in the bullfighter's favor, for she dealt him a deliberate little blow with her black eyes, and followed this with a brief but intimate smile. Then she took the note, touching his hand momentarily with her rough fingers, and disappeared without a word.

Angelito stood smiling, perfectly at ease, and expecting the maid to return with Rafael's fighting outfit. After a wait, there came a noise inside, which might possibly have been the maid dragging the cloak along the floor. The door opened, and Angelito's courage sank when he saw a *señora* and two *señoritas* in the entrance, inspecting him.

The *señora,* a large, exceedingly handsome woman with a faint mustache, asked in a barytone voice:

" Who wants these things, *señor?*"

Angelito moistened his red lips.

" I do, *señora.*"

The smaller *señorita,* who wore some sort of purple silk gown, loosed a cascade of impatient Spanish.

" *Ciertamente!* We know you do, *señor,* but to whom are you going to take them?"

" I — I — I am going to use it myself, *señorita.*"

" You a *novillero?*" whipped out the girl incredulously.

" But, Margarita," interposed the pleasant voice of the taller *señorita,* " look at his shoulders!"

" *Caramba,* all men have shoulders, Socorro!"

" But—ah—all of him, Margarita! It may be that Rafael thinks this youth has talent, and that he will make a *diestro* one day."

" He chooses odd friends," whipped out Margarita.

The *señora* with the barytone voice interposed to say:

" That man can't get on Rafael's jacket, or his pantaloons, either!"

The girl called Socorro laughed in a pleasant way.

" *Anda, madre,* that is their lookout. Think if Rafael should develop some one into a bullfighter — that would be something."

These repeated suggestions that some day he might make a bullfighter piqued Angelito. He fumed within himself.

" *Diantre,* they don't know I am Angelito! This blobby old woman and these soft girls come and shriek themselves hoarse over me every Sunday afternoon. They throw me handkerchiefs, jewelry, purses, and the devil knows what; and now, when they meet me, they stare at me and think I may some day make a *torero,* that there is a chance that I will make a *torero*—*huy!*"

Under the force of his disgust, a sudden and odd revenge popped into Angelito's head. He made a low bow and said:

" Pardon me, *señora, señoritas,* for intruding on your charming leisure, but if I should rip Rafael's jacket I would certainly have it stitched back very carefully."

" Oh, you needn't mind that," interposed the barytone, rather ashamed of her inhospitality.

" And I trust you will allow me to return your pocket handkerchief, *señorita,*" Angelito went on suavely.

He reached in his pocket, fished out a bit of lace and cambric, bowed again, and presented it to the girl Socorro. She took the handkerchief in some surprise, and looked at it.

" Why, this is my handkerchief!"

" *Seguramente, señorita.*"

She looked up at the *torero.*

" Where did you get it?"

" You let it drop, *señorita.*"

" I " — she looked about her — " did I drop my handkerchief?"

" Is it really your handkerchief?" said the smaller girl, and took it from her.

" *Señor,*" asked the barytone, " where did you get this handkerchief?"

Angelito thought quickly.

" I picked it up on the sand, *señora.*"

" *En la arena* " were his words. *Arena* might be the sand of the bull ring, but he glanced down at the sanded walk in which he stood, and the women did not catch his real meaning.

" Ah, here in the front door!" said the barytone. " You are careless, Socorro." She turned inside the hall. " You may bring Rafael's things, Lizetta."

The mulatto girl appeared with the *no-*

villero's equipment. This time she had the expressionless face of a servant in the presence of her mistress. She hesitated a moment whether to give them directly to Angelito, but the bullfighter solved the problem by hailing the cabman.

The driver hustled down from his high seat, and came running to take the bundle. The manner in which he ran told the importance of his fare. It had its effect.

Angelito bowed to the ladies with the suppleness of his profession. He felt at a spiteful ease now. His eyes glittered maliciously at Socorro.

"*Adios, señora, señoritas!*"

He walked away. The women in the doorway watched him.

"Socorro, he didn't find this handkerchief on the walk," Señorita Margarita said. "It smells of cigarettes. He's had it in his pocket for a long time."

"Rafael picks such odd friends!" observed the dowager, in her deep voice.

The girl Socorro stood studying the stranger who was carrying away Rafael's fighting things. She said, half to herself and half to her companion:

"If you think all men have shoulders like his, Margarita, you are not very observing!"

Angelito returned to his vehicle, directed the cabby to the Matadero, and drove off with a flourish and much self-satisfaction. He had come off very well indeed, he thought.

As he spun along the fragrant boulevard of Paraiso, his thoughts clung to the *señoritas* whom he had just met. He could not remember how the tall one looked. He held simply an impression of silks, a pensive oval face, a rather pale complexion, and splendid dark eyes. His prevailing impression was that she was a very luxurious girl. She was one of those *señoritas,* born and bred in Paraiso, who flung him jewels and handkerchiefs on Sunday afternoons, when, for their amusement, he grazed injury by a hair, and who didn't know that he existed on week days.

As he peered out of his cab at the villas he was passing, he thought with a certain unhappiness that these bright dwellings were full of beautiful *señoritas,* all as far away from him as the moon. It seemed to Angelito that they moved about on some stratum high in the air. On Sunday afternoons they came to the edge of their clouds, looked down on him in the bull ring, and applauded and laughed and cheered, and then, straightway, were drawn up again into some sort of heaven where he could not follow them at all.

The cab turned out of the boulevard into a more ordinary *calle.* The houses thickened, and eventually coalesced. Then he was trotting toward the Matadero through the smells and naked children and street venders of the slums. Paraiso had vanished from his sight and his nostrils, just as it must vanish from his life and his vague desires.

After ten or twelve blocks, the sewage-scented *calle* gave way to a sort of neglected ornamental ground set with tall Lombardy poplars. A street car track ran down through this ground, circled at the end, and returned. Beyond the circling track he saw a broad one-story structure of red brick, flanked by numberless cattle pens.

The moment his cab drew up to let him out he caught the rumor of a great disturbance in the pens—the bellowing of bulls, the shouting of men, the clatter of hoofs over stone pavements. As he walked on briskly through the sunshine, the pungent and rather sickening smell of blood came to his nose.

All this was as familiar to the *torero* as the palm of his hand. From this place he had sprung. Amid this confusion of cattle and men he had started his career.

He recalled as distinctly as yesterday how he had walked, year after year, from the adobe tenements down the car track to the Matadero, because he could not afford to ride. He remembered his thrill one day when he was chosen out of this bedlam to act as *monosabio* at the Viejo Circo. That was before the Nuevo Circo had been built.

He recalled just how proud he had been of his red shirt and blue trousers; how he had strutted about and handed the *banderillas* to the *banderilleros;* how he had helped to chain the dead bulls for the mules to drag them out. For all this old Malestar had given him a silver peso and a bottle of sour wine. It had made him deliriously happy and inordinately rich. He had never been so happy or so wealthy again.

As Angelito walked to the broad brick building of the Matadero, he could see the top runners of the pens on the south side of the building lined with shouting and laughing boys and men. They were as thick as green parrots in a cashew tree, and as noisy.

They were whooping and shrilling at the innumerable bullfights that were taking place inside the pens. Now and then they leaped from their roost on the top of the fence and ran a few steps, shouting with laughter. This was when a bull on the inside swerved toward their dangling legs. The moment the bull had passed, they clambered back up to their ringside seats.

Occasionally, through the legs of the onlookers, Angelito could catch a glimpse of a bull charging a man in the pens. He could hear the applause when the man stood his ground well and sidestepped narrowly.

That was the great idea in bullfighting—to elude the horns by as narrow a margin as one's nerves allowed. Once in a long while one of these peons at the Matadero was gored or killed.

Fastened over the door of the wide brick building was the head of a bull. The head was nailed there because the bull had accounted for one of the peons before it died. The head was an epitaph to some *novillero's* rashness.

When Angelito opened the door and entered, confusion smote his senses. There was a bellowing and shouting in his ears, there was the smell of hot blood in his nostrils. Half a dozen bulls were charging over the red concrete floor of the abattoir at the butchers, who waved red tow sacks at them and lured them to attack.

The animals, maddened by the odor, the shouts, and the red sacks, lunged after the half naked men with the greatest fury. The butchers poised themselves on the slippery floor until the last moment, then stepped to one side, and let the bulls dash into their sacks.

If an animal tried to wheel, its hoofs would slip on the bloody floor, and it would thunder down, its jaws and knees banging against the concrete. As it struggled to get up, a man called a *puntillero* would rush to the animal and give it a swift jab with a *puntillo,* or sharp iron spike, on the top of its head just behind the horns. Through a tiny unprotected spot the iron snipped the bull's spinal column, and the struggling animal collapsed as if struck by lightning.

Immediately three or four peons ran to the dead fighter, beheaded him, disemboweled him, flung his skin to one side, cut him into pieces, and dragged the pieces along the nasty floor to tubs of dirty water, where the raw beef was washed. Then it was hung up on hooks along the walls.

While this was going on, there played over the whole scene a constant shimmer of flies. The flies were like a dancing veil between bulls and men. They swarmed over the hides, the meat, the men, the bulls. Every movement flushed a gauze of them and deposited it at another place.

Charging bulls, dodging men, swarming flies—such was the Matadero, or government slaughter house, in Caracas.

This was the kindergarten, preparatory school, and high school of *toreros.* Four years before a barefooted, bare-bodied peon boy worked in this Gehenna. A *monosabio* had been required at the Viejo Circo, and he was given a chance. To-day that boy had driven down to the Matadero in a cab to select two more boys for *monosabios* and give them a chance. He wanted them to go with him to the coming bullfight in Valencia.

III

NORTHWARD from Candelaria Plaza runs a *calle* composed of two solid rows of stuccoed houses and a cobbled pavement. It diminishes with distance until it reaches the sharp acclivity of the mountains north of Caracas. There the thoroughfare becomes a mule trail, and any one standing in the plaza can still see it, a very faint, broken yellow line, zigzagging tediously up the vast purple-gray massif.

The name of this *calle* and trail is Traposo, for once there was a Trappist monastery in the mountains reached by following it. A little grass ventures to grow between the cobbles in Calle Traposo, and it is rather thicker toward the middle, because here it is watered and enriched by the sewage of all the houses in the street; for this waste flows on the surface, and pursues an impartial course down the middle of the street.

One of the *casas* on this thoroughfare was stuccoed, was painted a light blue, with panels of a deeper blue, and was decorated with shining bronze grilles in front of doors and windows.

From across the street an old peon woman approached the stuccoed house as she shuffled back from morning mass at Candelaria church. She stopped at the bright grille before the door, drew a bunch of keys from under her skirt, unlocked the grille, and swung it open for the day. Then she unlocked a small panel inset in the left shutter of the big double doors.

She stood for a moment in the weak light of the rising sun, looking down on the city, which was covered by the morning mists. The mist lay in a level lake of the palest opalescence, and concealed everything. The very *calle* in which the old woman stood marched down into it and was lost. At a little distance, there rose out of it the two old towers of the Candelaria, throwing bluish shadows on the pearly lake.

Beyond these lovely architectural islets rose other towers and spires, scattered through a space about a mile wide and three or four miles long, like buoys marking a drowned city.

The faery quality of the scene was lost on the old peon woman. The only object that held her eyes in the misty sea of nacre was a huge circular mass some half a mile to the southward. This cylindrical structure, with its battlemented top, was so placed that its eastern side was gilded a bright red, while its western half was lost in a deep blue. Barely discernible against its mighty façade was the inscription:

SOL Y SOMBRA

The words mean "sunshine and shadow." Used on a bull ring they designate the division of the seats, and correspond with the English "bleachers" and "grand stand." As if the distribution of light on the distant *circo* were symbolic, the "*sol*" on the eastern rhomb was brightly illuminated, while the "*sombra*," to the west, faded into shadow.

The old crone stared at this colorful building against the sea of pearl, blinked her eyes, and at last lifted the edge of her old *mantilla* to wipe them. As she did so, she whispered in the blurred Spanish of her sort:

"Oh, *Madre de Dios*, what an ugly place! What a horrible place! Sweet Virgin, send a *terremoto* and shake it down!"

In the passion of her malediction she crossed herself, kissed her thumb nail, and went inside the stuccoed house.

The *casa* had a wide tiled hallway, with rooms on the right-hand, or northern, side. The passage led straight into a bare *patio* surrounded by a colonnade with pink twisted columns and elaborate capitals. In the center of the *patio* was a fountain, which was dry, because the old woman could not stand the expense of allowing it to run.

On both sides of the *patio* were rooms. At one of the doors the old woman knocked and called:

"Pancho! Pancho!" She paused a moment, then flung out an aside: "*Caramba*, still in bed? Perhaps it is just as well he fights bulls. He would never make an honest living! Pancho! Pancho!" she croaked again.

Came the sound of turning and groaning. Then a querulous voice asked:

"*Madre*, how often have I begged you never to call me Pancho again?"

"*Oiga Jesu!*" cried the old woman angrily. "Denying the name the *padre* gave him when he lay screaming against my breast! *Huy!* Anyway, get up! Your coffee is ready. You ought to be married, Pancho, then you would have to get up."

Came a silence. Then the bullfighter said:

"I am thinking of getting a woman, *madre*."

The old woman in the *mantilla* stiffened. She stared at the door shutter.

"*Diantre!* Whom are you about to bring here, Pancho?"

"*Pues*," strung out the man's voice quizzically, "a peon girl."

The old woman exploded.

"A peon girl! A peon! The slut, the hussy! This is a fine catch of fish—risking your life for a fine *casa* like this, and then bringing home a peon girl!"

The bullfighter laughed.

"No, that was a joke, *madre*. I have in mind a very fine lady, a most beautiful *señorita*, a—"

"*Sangre de Cristo!* You wear the head of a donkey, Pancho, for all your fine feathers! A fine lady! A beautiful *señorita!* Don't you know she will marry you just for your money?"

"No, but she is rich herself," said the son seriously. "She is much wealthier than I am."

"Rich! Rich! That makes it all the worse, Pancho. She will marry you to betray you. None of these fine ladies are true to their husbands. *Caramba*, such a *bobo!* Only peon women are true to their men—at least, many of them are. I was."

Angelito broke out laughing heartily at this outburst. Then he caught himself up and reproved the crone.

"Are you without shame, *madre?* No lady would speak of such things to her son!"

"I'm no lady. I'm an honest peon."

"I say you are not a peon!" cried the bullfighter sharply. "Who ever heard of a peon living in such a *casa* as this, and lying in bed till—what is the hour?"

"It is eight, and has a good way on nine."

"*Caramba!*"

Came the sound of a swift springing out of bed and dressing. At that moment the doorbell rang.

"See who is at the door, Ana!" the *torero* called loudly.

The old woman instantly dropped her rôle of mother, and became a servant shuffling toward the entrance. In the hallway she called:

"Who is it, in the name of Christ?"

From outside the portals came the response, in carefully enunciated Spanish:

"We come in peace, the Señors Jiminez and Montauban."

The old woman became agitated. She went flying to the doors and unbolted both big shutters. Under her breath she was gasping:

"Holy Mary, a Jiminez and a Montauban! Next my son will have down the bishop himself!"

The good woman threw both big portals open, as if she were admitting a regiment. She led her visitors toward a wonderful salon, the first room on the right. She held open its door, displaying a gloomy interior, with a pair of crossed rapiers and some religious lithographs on the wall; but the two men, who were under the impression that they were in bachelor's quarters, said that they would shout Angelito out of his room.

The bullfighter himself heard their voices. He called through the panel that he would be out in a moment, and that they must have a cup of coffee before they started.

The two visitors protested, but their host cried:

"Ana, coffee for the *caballeros!*"

The next moment he flung his shutter open and appeared in the doorway.

"*Señors,*" he said, "my *casa* and all that it holds is yours!" He came out with a hand extended to each guest. "Take my left hand, Señor Montauban—it is nearest my heart!"

The old peon woman, who was hurrying through the *patio* to the kitchen in the rear, paused to look back at this cavalier reception and to nod her head in pleasure.

"Angelito," said Señor Montauban, taking the *torero's* hand in both his own, "I have just been remonstrating with Rafael on the folly of going to Valencia on such an adventure."

Angelito looked at young Jiminez.

"If Rafael doesn't want to go, I can easily find another *espada.*"

"*Caramba,* but I do want to go!" cried Rafael.

"But I say it is a mad hazard!" protested Montauban.

"It is one that Angelito accepts every Sunday, Narciso."

"That is quite beside the point, *mi caro amigo.* Angelito has been drilled in the fundamentals of bullfighting. He had the broadest foundation. In his youth he voluntarily surrendered the pleasures of most young men, and stayed in the Matadero from morning till night, studying bulls, learning to read the bovine mind. He is a ripened *diestro,* while you—pardon my frankness—you have fought *novilladas* perhaps twenty times in your life."

"*Valgame Dios,* I think my sister has turned you into an old maid!"

Montauban flushed somewhat beneath his sallow skin.

"No, I simply dislike to see a dear friend—"

"Every one fights his first bull at some time, Narciso, and what a night I have spent with this *corrida* in prospect! *Caramba,* the stars never shone so sweetly, Narciso. 'Perhaps they are the last stars I will ever see,' I thought. I held out my arms to them, and tried to think of never seeing the stars again—never! 'Let me gaze my last time on the stars!' I said."

The two men were looking at the poet, half seriously and half smilingly.

"Rafael," said Montauban, "sometimes I think you are mad."

Young Jiminez broke out laughing.

"You yourself, Narciso, in your paper advise men to live each day as if it were their last. You promulgate the doctrine that this is the only way in which we can feel the warmth and uniqueness of life."

"I stand to it," said Montauban. "It is a mood to assume; but I had no intention to suggest to a dear friend, whom I aspire to make my brother-in-law, to risk his life."

"Ah, there you are!" cried the poet earnestly. "That is the secret malady of all Venezuelans—the impulse to sit and fancy this or that, and to attempt nothing. They never reach the real ictus in the prosody of life — action. Unless a man places his life at hazard, Narciso, he cannot possibly feel the ecstasy of living. God's lightning, how my pulse leaped when I awoke this morning! Be sure I got up betimes to see the sunrise. It was the first that I have seen in years, and I thought—but wait one moment!"

As he uttered these words in his excited voice, young Jiminez drew from his pocket a parchment, unrolled it, and began to read:

"If this be my last,
Let me bare my breast to its creeping gold,
Let me clasp the sun in my arms and drink its light to the last drop.
I will absorb it all—the sun, the mountains, level lake of pearl,
Cathedral towers like curious carven isles,
And swallows dipping to the misty sea.

"This moment I am they,
Their mystic whole somehow dissolved in me;
Each disparate part knows not itself, nor the aching beauty of the whole.
Without me, all were chaos.

"Therefore, oh, black-horned bull,
Knock not too roughly at a *torero's* breast
With keen inquisitive horns, lest thy rash fury
Shatter sunrise, light, and fragrance,
Swallows dipping to a misty sea, and plunge all into endless and untimely night!"

Señor Montauban suddenly threw his arms about the poet.

"Rafael!" he cried. "What perfection!" He held his friend off by the shoulder to look at him. "May Heaven strike me if I allow such a genius to be exposed to the perils of the bull ring! What do you call it?"

"'A Premonition of Night,'" said Rafael, warming in his friend's praise.

"*Caramba,* what a splendid paradox, to describe a sunrise and involve in it the coming of night!"

"There you are!" cried Rafael, delighted. "I did not have to study and beat my head to produce that fancy. *Pues,* it was forced on me. When a man sees a sunrise which may very well be his last, *naturalmente,* he thinks of the night."

Señor Montauban looked at his friend and spread his hands hopelessly.

"*Olà,* what an exquisite instrument to be battered around a bull ring! At any rate, Rafael, you must give me the verses to print in *Sol y Sombra.*"

Rafael looked at his script.

"Narciso, it is foolish for a man to appear here and there with a few fugitive verses. I want first to publish something definitive—a volume by which the public can get the perspective of my talent, if I have any."

"When will you have a volume ready?"

"If I could fight in a *corrida* every day, Narciso, very soon."

At this point the old peon woman came forward with little cups of black coffee. She sneezed as she came, but quickly repeated the formula, "Jesus, José, and Maria," to exorcise any evil the sneeze may have caused.

Angelito and his guests tossed down their dark nectar and then started out to Señor Montauban's motor, which waited in the *calle.* The three men were in a hurry to catch the train to Valencia, so they stood in the doorway and made hissing sounds—"*Psst! Psst! Psst!*"—up and down the *calle,* signaling for a boy to come and carry their trappings from the house to the motor. As they grew more impatient, their hissing became more intense.

It looked as if they certainly must miss the train, when a boy came running out of a charcoal shop some three doors below. He came, carried out the equipment of the *toreros,* and deposited it in the car. The three men tumbled in hastily, flung the urchin a coin, and motored off.

By this time the mist had cleared away. The friends drove rapidly down Calle Traposo, turned eastward, followed the electric track for some two miles, and found themselves at the station. This consisted of two small buildings set in a grove of magnificent trees and an unsheltered platform lying along a narrow-gauge track.

A blue-capped porter seized on the baggage of the travelers and inquired their destination. Then he hurried off, bought the tickets, and checked their bags, so that all the *caballeros* did was simply to sit in their motor and settle with the porter when he returned.

A number of passengers were waiting for the train, so the porters were kept very busy. At last came a tootling down the track, and a diminutive locomotive with a string of four small cars rattled up to the platform. Angelito and Rafael made their adieus to Señor Montauban, and got aboard the train.

The little coach they entered was just wide enough for a double seat on one side and a single seat on the other. The poet and the bullfighter got a double seat together, and after the brief ringing of a bell the train panted up into the mountains.

Angelito leaned back in his seat and looked out of the window with a sense of pleasure at the changing view. For a little way they ran through a valley with palms and tropical trees. Then, as they ascended, this gave way to stunted trees with great expanses of yellow and green grass.

The track wound tortuously in and out among the mountain spurs. Often the bullfighter could see the little engine ahead. It always reminded him of some dwarf humped over, with legs flying, dashing along at a great rate.

The track continually passed through small tunnels. Angelito could see these little holes lying far ahead, punched in the buttresses of the mountain. It seemed extraordinary to think that his train could ever get through such tiny openings.

The small tunnels accented the Cyclopean reach and swing of the Andes. Valleys dropped away to dizzy depths. Once Angelito saw a vulture sailing far below him, but evidently at a great height. Now and then the little train rattled across a bridge over some rocky gorge, with a river boiling whitely far beneath. The noise of the waters reached him as a kind of whiffing at his ears, and was gone.

Occasionally the train would stop at a wayside station, a mere collection of adobe houses which looked as if they might have sprung up out of the soil of the mountains. Fruit venders offered their wares through the car windows. It was Angelito's impulse to buy some mamones, as he liked to ride in a train, watch the scenery unfold, and break the little green globes of sirup in his mouth; but this time he did not purchase any, on account of Rafael. He had observed that *caballeros* did not eat on the train, except at mealtime.

At every station more peons crowded into the coaches armed with baskets and bottles, bent on making a fiesta and seeing the bullfight at Valencia. The seats were soon occupied, and then the aisles became crowded. The peons talked noisily with one another. Some peered through the car windows and laughed excitedly at the speed the train was making. They ate oranges, bananas, and casabas, moved by the childlike impulse to make a holiday by eating endlessly.

Angelito watched their gustation with a faint envy. He saw them throw their peels and bottles out of the windows. After all, he could not see why men of Rafael's and Montauban's class did not please themselves in so simple a manner when they were on trains. The time had to be spent somehow. To gaze out of the car window and to taste mamone sirup—that was something.

A girl and her father, both of the better class, sat just ahead of him. Something about the turn of the girl's cheek vaguely resembled Socorro Jiminez, and reminded him of his adventure at the Jiminez villa. Then he recalled what Montauban had said about aspiring to be Rafael's brother-in-law. The idea struck Angelito somehow as incongruous—such a girl as Socorro Jiminez being married to such a dried up fellow as the editor of *Sol y Sombra.*

He turned impulsively to his seat mate.

"Rafael," he asked, "is Señor Montauban your sister's *fiancé?*"

Rafael, who was nearest the window, was gazing with a far-away look at the unrolling panorama of the Andes. He withdrew his eyes and looked absently at the *torero.*

"Señor Montauban—pardon me, Angelito, what did you ask?"

"Is Señor Montauban your sister's *fiancé?*"

Rafael shrugged indifferently.

"*Cà!* It may be, I don't know."

He sat musing for several moments, apparently thinking over the question. Finally he said:

"Marriage is like this railroad track—a very trivial thing among vast mountains. I really doubt if one could magnify it sufficiently to be considered in a place like this. A man would be a fool to set a love tale among mountains. Perhaps 'Romeo and Juliet'—or the Sapphic odes—"

He paused, and seemed to decide against something, for he shook his head.

"No—quite impossible!"

By this time Angelito was growing accustomed to gathering only a vague idea of what Rafael meant, and often no idea at all. He resumed his thoughts of the Señorita Jiminez and Señor Montauban, while his eyes followed the hulls and rinds and bottles which the peons threw out of the windows.

IV

THE bull ring at Valencia is a big circular affair inclosed by a brick wall some ten feet high, with the grand stand, or *sombra* section of the seats encircling its northern half. Entrance is obtained by two gates on the north side, and over these gates is painted the legend of all bull rings, "*Sol y Sombra.*"

Bearing down on the *circo* from all quarters came cabs, motors, and pedestrians, while a great crowd of idlers stood in the hot sunshine in the plaza, and would remain there throughout the *corrida,* sensing the progress of the fight by the roaring of the spectators.

As Rafael and Angelito drove up in a cab, the legend above the entrance caught the poet's attention, and he repeated the phrase aloud:

"Sunshine and shadow—I wonder which it will bring me to-day, Angelito!"

At that moment Angelito was telling the driver to drive around to the south side of the ring.

"Aren't we going to the entrance?" asked the poet quickly.

"No—to the bulls' entrance, behind the ring."

"*Ciertamente,* I knew that."

The poet's eyes moved excitedly over the plaza, the gathering crowd, and the blank brick walls of the spacious building, as they drove around.

The bulls' entrance, on the southern side of the *circo,* was a rough door set in the wall, and beside it stood a ramshackle old ambulance with two poor horses hitched to it. The intense heat reflected from the wall rose about the fighters as they got out of their cab.

Angelito knocked at the gate. It opened quickly, and a tall, limber-looking boy in a red shirt and blue trousers made him a bobbing bow.

"You beat us here, José," said the *torero* kindly.

"*Sí, señor,*" hissed José, grinning with pleasure at being addressed by the *diestro.* "Jesus and I jumped off the train as soon as it stopped, and ran here as fast as we could, so we wouldn't be late."

Angelito smiled as he recalled the time when, as a *monosabio,* he ran to the *circo* as fast as he could, impelled by a terrible fear that he might be late.

A moment afterward the boy had the bullfighters' equipment out of the cab, and the three passed through the gate together. The fighters entered a little space fenced off from the arena by a high board wall. Opposite the first gate was another, in the board wall, leading into the arena. Here stood a span of melancholy mules with red tassels on their old harness, ready to drag the dead bulls from the arena. In the hot sunshine, a faint smell of the slaughter-house pervaded the place.

On the east side of this small inclosure a shed had been erected to make a rough dressing room. Here half a dozen men and boys were dressing for the *corrida.* The boys were putting on the red and blue uniforms of the *monosabios;* the men, the bright-colored trunks and tight jackets of *banderilleros.*

Just beyond the eastern partition of the dressing room Angelito could hear the bulls moving in their stalls. He could smell the ammoniacal scent of the animals mingled with the odor of decaying blood.

A priest in his cassock stood in the dressing room, talking to the group. He had in his hands the crucifix and holy oil, ready, in case of necessity, to administer extreme unction to the players.

When Angelito and Rafael entered, the priest came over to the *toreros* at once. He knew Angelito from former fights, and offered his hand. The bullfighter bent and kissed it.

"How well you are looking, Angelito!" he complimented. "*Cà!* A man can keep well in Caracas, up in the mountains, but here in Valencia it is so hot—" He made a gesture expressive of the heat. "*Pues,* we have a great crowd to-day. The cathedral was jammed, and a little army came to confession." He turned toward Rafael. "Whom have we here?"

"A *torero* who fights unknown, *padre.*"

"*Caramba,* an unknown sword — that is indeed romantic! I shall expect thrilling deeds from you, *señor,* but—take care of yourself!"

He patted Rafael on the arm in paternal fashion.

At that moment, out in the *circo,* the municipal band began playing a waltz. The swing of the music went through Angelito, who always counted the music as the real beginning of a bullfight. After that it climbed by ascending thrills to the death of the bull.

He hoped the bulls would be steady animals, for Rafael's sake. He had a feeling that he was Rafael's host, and that he was personally responsible for his safety.

The two fighters began getting out of their everyday clothes into their fighting regalia. Two *monosabios* acted as valets, laying out their trunks, jackets, stockings, capes, cloaks, sashes, and bandages.

The *monosabio* José attended to Angelito, taping his feet, and buckling the bottom of his knee-length trunks as tightly as he could just above the knees. Then the *torero* stood up, and the boy took one end of a long silk sash. Angelito adjusted the other end to his waist, and then began turning slowly, winding on fold on fold of the tough silk. A tight green jacket, heavily crusted with embroidery, came down to his waist. Over this jacket Angelito wore his bullfighter's cloak—a long, sleeveless tunic, which swung from his shoulders, reaching down to his thighs; but on account of the heat he did not put this on at once.

Angelito's costume was green with silver beading; Rafael's was of purple velvet with gold embroidery, and was the richer of the two.

The *banderilleros* who were in the dressing room with the *diestros* wore travesties of this rich apparel. Their trunks and jackets were made of bright cotton cloth ornamented with steel buttons. Angelito was rather ashamed of these men, who were to be Rafael's fighting companions.

The last thing Angelito did was to take down his pigtail, which he wore inconspicuously brushed upward with the hair on the top of his head. Now he did it in a knot, and fitted over it his *mona*—a little black cap not as large as his fist, which stuck directly out on the back of his head.

The *mona* and the pigtail are ancient badges of the bullfighter's profession. They might possibly protect a man from being stunned and killed in case of a sudden fall.

Near the end of these preparations a sour-faced man with a drooping mustache climbed down a ladder which leaned against the side of the shed. He got far enough down to see the fighters, and waved an impatient arm at them.

"*Pronto! Prisa!*" he urged. "The *circo* is already full. The crowd is getting restless!"

This, apparently, was addressed to the *banderilleros,* for he changed tone and spoke civilly enough to Angelito.

"Are you nearly ready for the procession, Señor Angelito?" he inquired.

"When the *padre* is ready," said the bullfighter.

Thereupon the cleric stepped forward, and the group of fighters turned to a crucifix hung on the east wall of the dressing room. This wall creaked occasionally from the movement of the bulls on the other side.

The priest placed his palms together, and began a prayer for the safety of the fighters. He looked steadfastly at the crucifix, and his Spanish was sonorous and fervent.

Angelito knelt stiffly, on account of his tight knee buckles. He spread his arms to the carved figure, and the cadaverous color of the body with its gouts of dull red paint reminded him of a victim of a bullfight. The stigma in the side might very well have been the thrust of a horn. The image moved a little now and then, under the pressure of the animals on the other side of the wall.

The man clinging to the ladder did not pray, because he was not going to fight. He was the promoter of the *corrida.* The moment the *padre* ceased praying he called briskly:

"All right now! Form line!"

Then he scrambled back to the roof of the shed, where he could overlook the arena.

All the fighters put on their brilliant cloaks—green, purple, orange, violet—gay actors in the uncertain tragedy they were about to stage. Behind the *toreros* and *banderilleros* came a double file of *monosabios,* with bright red shirts and blue trousers. These were the novices of the ring, the developing bullfighters. At the end of the procession were the poor old mules with red tassels on their harness.

As the brilliantly colored troupe stood silent in the stinking inclosure, Angelito glanced around to see how Rafael was accepting such poor surroundings. The poet was staring through the gate.

"*Dios!*" thought Angelito. "I was stupid to bring such a man to this provincial *circo.* I should have dissuaded him from this foolish adventure!"

The black-mustached man on the roof, after scanning the formation in the little yard, waved a hand toward the arena. The band abruptly stopped the waltz and broke into a military march.

Angelito straightened himself. The double gates that led into the arena were thrown open. On his eyes flared the wide yellow of the sand and the color of the sunshades and the women's gala dresses gilding the great horseshoe of seats in the intense sunlight. The *torero* leaned forward, and, keeping step to the music, marched at the head of the troupe into the amphitheater.

A burst of shouting and clapping of hands greeted the entry of the fighters. It came to Angelito like a shaking of the air. They were uproarious, these unaccustomed Valencians. He heard his own name shouted over and over. Not often did the premier *diestro* of Caracas come over the mountains to Valencia.

Angelito marched around the arena with a bold swinging of his green cloak. He looked up at the bank of faces. Handkerchiefs, sunshades, and walking canes were flourished at him. It was a din of triumph.

It poured strength into Angelito. It keyed him up for great things. He bowed and smiled at these frantic provincials, and in the back of his head he was glad that Rafael should hear this ovation. He was somebody, even if not a *hidalgo*. Young Jiminez could hardly avoid mentioning this uproar to his sister.

In one of the ringside boxes Angelito saw a girl with scarlet flowers in her hair. She reminded him vaguely of Socorro Jiminez. On an impulse, he swung off his green cloak and shot it up through the air to her. She caught it, evidently with the most intense pleasure, and spread it on the circular balustrade of the boxes, with its bright green hanging inside the ring.

After the first *diestro* had thus paid his tribute to beauty, Rafael and the *banderilleros* flung up their cloaks at regular intervals around the grand stand. The spectators caught them and spread them on the balustrade, where they gave new and brilliant touches of color to the ensemble.

Just inside the circle of boxes was a low inner wall, which cut off a narrow passage completely around the arena. Narrow openings through the wall—which is called the *barrera,* or barrier — admitted fighters into the passage in their flight from the bulls.

Angelito and Rafael went over to the barrier in front of the center of the grand stand, while the *monosabios* and *banderilleros* spread out over the yellow sand to play the bull. On the south side of the ring the promoter of the fight still stood on top of the dressing room. He was to lift a door in the southern wall of the arena, to turn a bull into the ring.

He gave a signal, the band ceased playing. Came that moment of suspense immediately before the thrilling drama of the bullfight.

From his stand at the extreme northern rim of the banks of seats, a herald blew a blast on his trumpet. It was a brave fanfare of notes, a single loud voice defying danger, the pride of a swordsman in his skill.

The distant promoter, on top of the dressing shed, pulled on an invisible rope. A black rectangle appeared in the yellow wall beneath him. Every eye in the amphitheater was fixed on this black opening. Angelito watched it, and in his heart he hoped it would send forth some worthy bull, a noble foe.

The head and horns of a big animal appeared out of the blackness and emerged into the dazzling sunshine. The man on top of the wall lifted two crimson rosettes and flung them downward with all his strength. Their iron barbs stuck deep in the bull's shoulders.

The next instant the animal came snorting and plunging into the arena, and all the *banderilleros* and red jackets fell into a maze of swift play, to draw its charge; but a single glance told Angelito that the bull was a failure. Instead of instantly singling out some enemy, it flung its head about, and tried to rake the rosettes out of its shoulders. When a *monosabio* came near it, the animal would snort, shake its head, or make a half-hearted charge. It was a disgraceful bull.

Disgust went over Angelito. He knew that no mortal man can tell whether a bull will fight, but nevertheless a tame bull, just when he was keyed up for battle, always tortured him.

One of the *banderilleros* did succeed in provoking the animal to charge him. He stamped his feet and waved two red *banderillas* at the creature, and at last the bull rushed.

The man stood with his short red spears lifted as high as he could hold them. He leaned over the horns of the charging bull, drove the *banderillas* into the big shoulders, immediately behind the rosettes, and swung his body out of the way. The bull charged past with two new torments in his shoulders.

But that was the last play they succeeded in getting out of the cowardly bull. After that it ran away from the men like a stray cow.

After three or four minutes of driving it around the arena, the spectators began hissing and catcalling. The promoter opened the door to the bull pen again, and the *monosabios* drove the animal ignominiously through it. As it leaped through the gate it raked off one of the rosettes, which lay a little red mark in the glare of yellow sand.

Angelito was chagrined at this stupid *corrida*. That he had brought Rafael along somehow made it worse. He feared this poor exhibition would be retailed to Socorro Jiminez. At the thought, he looked appealingly at Rafael amid the hisses and catcalls.

"*Demonio!* These provincials! No *circo*, no dressing room, no attendants, and no bulls! I'll never take another such engagement as long as I live!"

"*Cà!* The next bull may be better," suggested Rafael.

But the next bull was little better. When the promoter flung the rosettes into its shoulders, it plunged into the arena in a rage, and chased its bright-colored enemies behind the barrier, but its first rush did not last long. After the *banderilleros* had pinned a pair of darts in its shoulders, the bull grew wary. When it came time for the dart throwers to quit their play and for Angelito to bring about the animal's death, the *torero* had difficulty in luring the bull to attack at all. The big creature stood in the center of the arena with two yellow *banderillas* dangling from its streaked shoulders.

Angelito approached it, swung his red cape at it. The big brute simply pawed the ground and shook its horns. The *torero* advanced within three steps of the creature, swung his cloak almost against its nose. The bull lowered its head and charged. Its bulk passed under the red cape. Its high hump tossed up the *torero's* arms; its barrel barely grazed Angelito's stomach and legs. The smell of the hot animal enveloped him, and he lifted a hand to wipe from his face a thread from its slavering muzzle.

Came a rattle of applause at this first interesting play, but the bull's fire was spent. Instead of charging again, it moved away from the swordsman. Angelito followed it, filled with shame and anger. He felt more like a neatherd than a *torero*. He shook his head, whipped his rapier in disgust so that all the spectators might see that he was disgusted.

At last, after Angelito had followed and stamped in an absurd fashion, the bull turned and faced him. The *torero* knew this would be the bull's last charge. He lifted the hilt of his rapier level with his eyes and sighted along the steel at the little spot right on top of the bull's shoulders through which he could strike the heart.

Finally the animal charged. Angelito leaned toward the advancing bulk. He saw the tip of his rapier disappear between the shoulders. He thrust fiercely downward, to sheathe his weapon in the huge animal; but the half-breed bull could not endure the steel. It swerved, jerked the rapier from Angelito's hands, and bolted away, with the weapon about half buried between its shoulders.

At this mishap all the *banderilleros* ran out, trying to head off the bull. As the frightened animal ran past them, they swung their red capes at the sword, trying to wrap them around the hilt and draw it out. The bull, quite beside itself with terror and pain, leaped over the barrier into the inner runway. *Banderilleros* and *monosabios* opened a gate in the barrier, and tried to drive the animal out; but blood began flowing from the brute's nostrils, and presently it knelt in this narrow space, its hind parts tumbled against the fence.

One of the *banderilleros* now drew out the sword, and brought it back to Angelito, wiping it on his cape as he came. A *monosabio* killed the bull. Then old mules came jingling in, to drag the dead animal out of the runway, across the arena, and out of the bulls' gate.

As the bull went out, the herald blew a triumphant blast on his bugle, and a moment later the band broke into a gay air; but this triumph was pure routine, and without heart. There were catcalls and hissings. A scattering of men rose in the boxes, and began making their way toward the entrance. Others shouted:

"*Viejo toro!*"—"Old bull!"

"Give us our money back!"

"This is no bullfight, it is merely a slaughterhouse!"

"A lifeless old hide!"

"We won't pay money to see a beef killed!"

The *monosabios* pushed out barrows of sand, to cover up a few red stains in the arena, and shoveled up some of the droppings of the tortured bull; but the red-shirted youngsters worked with embarrassment under the shadow of public disapproval. Angelito occasionally shook his head and whipped his sword, to express his disgust. He was afraid the newspapers would advertise his fiasco. They might even prevent him from entering the big Spanish *corrida* which was approaching.

"*Demonio!*" he growled to Rafael. "Why did we ever come to such a place as Valencia?"

The promoter climbed down from the roof of the dressing room shed, and later Angelito saw him coming up the passageway between the barrier and the seats. The grand stand likewise saw him, and a scattered cry of "*Fuego! Fuego!*" ran over the crowd.

The promoter hurried up to Angelito.

"*Señor,*" he cried, among the noises of the spectators, "we must do something to hold the people! *Caramba!* Look how they are going away, and no doubt demanding their money back at the gate!"

Angelito made a sharp gesture.

"*Demonio,* I did not select these cowardly bulls!"

"Will you complain if I hearten them the best I can?"

The *torero* knew what the promoter was hinting at.

"But think of my standing as a fighter!" he protested.

"*Sangre de Cristo!*" cried the fellow. "Shall I lose all my gate money on account of your standing as a fighter? Will you disappoint the crowd at a great religious *fiesta* on account of your standing as a fighter?"

More cries of "*Fuego! Fuego!*" came from the seats, and the promoter made a despairing gesture.

Rafael shrugged.

"*Cà!* Let him go ahead! In the provinces one must be a provincial!" he said.

Angelito stood out a little longer, saying that what the promoter proposed was cruel—*inordinato;* but Rafael's desertion decided the matter. The impresario made a gesture of agreement, and turned back toward the bull pen again.

"*Caramba,* what a fight!" snapped Angelito, in disgust.

The spectators were suddenly on the *qui vive.* Came a clatter of applause, while men who were going out turned back to their seats. There were more cries of "*Fuego!*" Women waved their sunshades.

The promoter reappeared on the shed. The crowd roared, because his distant figure held two flaming torches in his hands. In the midst of the uproar came the buoyant fanfare of the herald. At these penetrating notes complete silence fell over the arena.

The promoter opened the door of the bull pen. An instant later the head of a black bull appeared in the opening. The promoter lifted his fiery torches and hurled them down into the shoulders of the brute.

An instant whirl of action followed. The bull, with flames leaping from its back, charged in a fury of pain at the bright-colored gadflies that danced before it. The spectators gathered to celebrate the holy *fiesta* shrieked, howled, flung up hats and sunshades, stamped with ecstasy.

The bull shot like a huge black bolt at everything that moved. *Banderilleros* dashed behind the barrier, while their fellows drew the endless charge.

A man in yellow came out with yellow *banderillas,* and the bull hurtled at him. The player lifted his darts and leaned over, but his haste in striking threw him out of balance, and he stuck the *banderillas* awkwardly—one down on the bull's shoulder, the other too far up its neck. A disgraceful play! They should have been neatly paired just behind the rosettes.

However, the spectators roared joyously, not regarding this fine point of art and symmetry.

"Fire! Fire!" they repeated.

They were happy, but the ragged *banderillas* and the applause irritated Angelito.

"*Caramba!* These Valencians are low animals!" he thought. "They applaud stupidities!"

Then he saw that Rafael Jiminez was selecting a rapier from four or five offered him by a *monosabio.* Angelito looked at his friend in alarm.

"Rafael!" he called above the applause. "I will do this. That bull is crazed. It is no ordinary risk—your sister—"

The poet whipped out a sword.

"God's lightning!" he exclaimed angrily. "Don't I escape my mother and sister even in Valencia?"

He sighted down the thin ribbon of the blade, which looked like watered silk.

"But, Rafael," warned the experienced bullfighter, "you are going in too early. Let the *banderilleros* wear him down a bit!"

For answer, the youth picked up his crimson cape and whipped his rapier under it, so as to hold out the bright-hued silk on the steel.

Angelito stepped forward and touched his arm.

"*Mi amigo,* I tell you it is dangerous now—very dangerous. I wouldn't attempt it myself!"

But the spectators saw the poet advancing with sword and cape into the yellow ring, and new gusts of applause swept over them.

"*Magnifico! Guapo! Invicto!*" they shouted, hailing the young man's courage.

Angelito stood by the barrier, watching the slender figure in purple and gold walk out on the sand with the light step of a trained fighter. He thought of Socorro again, and what the girl would do if anything should happen to Rafael.

The *banderilleros* were now playing the bull toward the center of the ring. When they had lured him in front of Rafael, the whole troupe dashed for the barriers. The sudden shift from these flying colored figures to a single purple fighter standing quietly in the sunshine brought even the tortured bull to a standstill.

About the young aristocrat hung a natural grace which none of the other performers even approached. A wave of the crimson silk cape, and the black monster flashed at the youth. The bull whipped up the silk with its bulk, it wheeled and came again. With a curving gesture of his cape, Rafael seemed to swing the great black bulk to the other side. The flaming animal passed under his outstretched arms, and the youth drew the bull around once again.

The poet's play looked as simple and rhythmic as dancing. In the brilliant sunshine, the spectators watched this play of flame, color, and danger in absolute silence. Angelito stared at it as if hypnotized. What a *diestro* the youth was! What a marvel!

In Angelito's thoughts, Rafael's skill wound itself about his sister Socorro. *Dios in cielo!* What a *señorita* she must be! What a brother, what a sister!

Something struck Angelito on the back of his hand. He looked down. A piece of jewelry lay on the sand. A sudden uproar broke from the amphitheater, and silver, coins, fans, and kerchiefs fell into the bull ring.

As Angelito looked around, a kind of gasp went over the crowd. The *torero* knew that gasp!

He whirled. The next moment he seized a rapier and dashed across the sand toward the fight.

As the bull charged, flame and smoke from the torches had whipped the poet in the eyes. Angelito saw the bull lunging straight at the youth. He saw Rafael give back, blinking, lift his rapier, and try to defend himself.

The point struck a bone as the brute lunged. The blade doubled and snapped. The next moment the huge head was under the fighter.

As the bull tossed, the slender figure was flung high over the black head. The body fell on the animal's black hind quarters, and then rolled to the sand.

The bull whirled to impale the purple figure when Angelito flung himself on the monster, blanketing its head in his red cape. An instant later the *torero* was rushed backward, caught between the bull's horns.

Amphitheater, *banderilleros,* the sand beneath him, became a blur of flying color to Angelito. All that he saw distinctly was the red cape over the head and the flying black shoulders with the sputtering rosettes of flame; but before the bull could toss him, the *torero* had shortened his rapier and stabbed furiously at the great head under the red cloth.

His long training in the Matadero guided Angelito's steel. It struck home in the little unprotected spot over the spinal cord. Next moment the bull collapsed.

The *torero* went tumbling backward along the sand, but he rolled like a gymnast, came up on his feet with a perfect sense of direction, and, without a pause, went running to Rafael.

The *banderilleros* were picking up the wounded youth. The poet's beautiful face was chalky. His great black eyes turned on Angelito.

With a terrible pang, the bullfighter thought of Socorro Jiminez.

"Oh, wounds of Christ!" he gasped, putting his arms about Rafael to help carry him. "Beloved *camarado,* are you deeply gored?"

The figure in the arms of the men shrugged faintly, attempted to smile, then closed his eyes against the dazzling glare of the sun.

The amphitheater was roaring with ecstasy. It was aflutter with rainbows. In the midst of this storm of delight the herald blew a shrill note of triumph. The door of the bull pen opened, the old mules trotted out and dragged the dead bull out of the ring.

Rafael's crimson cape was left alone in the yellow arena.

V

THAT afternoon as the train from Valencia climbed back across the Andes, Angelito sat in the baggage car, beside the litter on which Rafael lay. The *espada's* seat was a bale of cloth from one of Valencia's cloth mills. Angelito sat humped over, chin in hands, with a dozen miserable thoughts gnawing at his brain. He felt himself culpable for agreeing to fight a bull tortured by flambeaux. He thought of the grief so soon in store for Socorro Jiminez and her mother. Occasionally there flickered through his mind what the newspapers would say about his fight at Valencia. They might very well discredit him, and destroy his chance of taking part in the great Spanish *corrida* which was approaching.

Then his thoughts would return to Socorro Jiminez. What would the girl think of him?

The unhappy fellow fished with his forefinger under his collar, and drew up his rosary. He began passing the beads through his fingers, his lips moving to the appropriate prayers, but his thoughts clung about the wounded poet, the sister, the wretchedness he was bringing her, the newspapers, the coming Spanish *corrida* from which he might be barred, and the sister again.

It seemed to Angelito that Socorro Jiminez had been for him a distant possibility, but now he could hardly hope to gain another glance from her.

A white sheet was drawn over the poet up to his chin. His pale face shook to the tremors of the train. A terrifying thought struck Angelito—that his friend was dead; but at that moment the black eyes opened and looked at the bullfighter.

Angelito leaned over and put his ear close to Rafael's lips.

"Do you want something, Rafael?"

"You—mustn't—tell—Socorro."

"No, I won't." Then Angelito happened to think that this was absurd. "How can I help it, Rafael?"

"Take—me—to—your—*casa.*"

"I could do that." The fighter was rather surprised at the suggestion. "They will be expecting you to return."

"Tell her—I have gone—to the Tuy—family estate on the Tuy."

Angelito nodded.

"Yes, I'll do that, Rafael."

The poet lay without speaking, pressing his lips together in his stresses of pain. Angelito leaned over him, yearning to do something to ease the jolting of the train. He slipped his palms under the wounded man's dark, rumpled hair, and held the weight of his head. Thus supported, the sufferer looked weakly through the door of the baggage car.

"Sunset!" he whispered. "The end of the day!"

The bullfighter followed the stricken man's gaze. Through the rectangle of the door he saw the clouds of an Andean sunset rising up from the abysses below. Some dark and monstrous caldron was boiling red and purple vapors against a sky of tingling blues and greens.

The bullfighter recalled the poem Rafael had read to Narciso Montauban that morning, and he knew that his friend was thinking of his verses now.

Such a feeling of pathos seized Angelito that tears welled from his eyes and dropped between his outstretched arms. He felt sure that his friend would die. It seemed that because Rafael had written the poem, this evil had come upon him.

The thought of Socorro Jiminez mingled with her brother's tragedy. All the imagery and fineness of the poet, his grace and daring in the *corrida,* his silent endurance of the jolting of the train, and now his weak, sad gazing at the sunset—all these endearing finenesses somehow inhered also in Socorro Jiminez. She, too, was fine, brave, patrician, sensitive, and patient, somehow in a more exquisite way than Rafael himself.

At moments it seemed to Angelito that through her brother he was in some way ministering to the girl herself, and for her his tears were falling.

VI

WITH the installation of Rafael as a patient in the front room of the blue *casa* on Calle Traposo, medicos and sisters of charity became familiars of the house. The front room, with its frieze of rose vases, crossed rapiers, and religious lithographs, now reeked of disinfectants. At Rafael's bedside arose the melancholy scaffolding of a Murphy's drip, with its elevated tank and its tubes which ran down into the poet's wounds and out again into a slop jar. The faint *tap, tap, tap,* of the solution might have been the poet's life dripping away.

With such a terrible example of the injuries which might be received from a bullfight constantly before her eyes, the old peon woman, Angelito's mother, went about her work mumbling continual prayers for the safety of her son. On this particular morning she was in her own room, a little den far to the rear of the *patio,* which had been made for servants, and which she chose instinctively for her quarters when her son moved her out of the squalor of the Matadero district to this *casa.*

To give point to her reverie, she was still stitching the rents in Rafael's fighting trunks where the bull's horns had penetrated. She had washed the blood from the fabric, but the torn places still frightened her, and she was hardly able to control her stitches.

"*Oh, madre in cielo!*" she prayed, blinking her eyes as she bent over the work. "My poor Pancho! Some day, some day—"

She broke off, shaking her old head fearfully, when the door opened without any formality, and Angelito put in his head.

"Have you got it fixed, *madre?*" he asked.

"In a moment or two, *hijo.* Won't you come in?"

The bullfighter hesitated and glanced up the *patio,* to see if any one was in sight. Then he stepped inside and closed the door behind him. He looked about in distaste.

"*Caramba,* what a room! As much like our old hovel in the Matadero as two peas!"

"This is much drier, my son."

"And your lottery tickets, and your peppers, and your yammi roots!" He stood looking about the dirt floor in the depth of disgust. His eyes paused on a kind of board stuck full of lottery tickets, such as the street venders carry around on the streets of Caracas. "*Madre,* how often have I asked you never again to sell a lottery ticket?"

The old creature looked stubbornly at the tickets.

"It makes money, Pancho."

"Three thousand devils!" he stormed. "We have enough money! Look at this *casa*—fifteen or twenty rooms! *Valgame Dios,* I don't know how many rooms, and you pick the worst one! I have bought you dresses, and you wear that old skirt! I buy shoes, and you wear *alpargatas,* and now you sell lottery tickets for more money!"

The old peon woman stitched silently on the torn velvet trunks.

"Why don't you give up fighting bulls, Pancho?" she asked doggedly.

The man stared at her.

"I have to have money to run all this."

"But why run it?" cried the peon woman. "You could sell this *casa* and live forever in safety. You need never take another risk."

Angelito looked at his mother, and drew down his lips. "How long do you think my friends would recognize me, *madre,* if I lived in such a hovel as you have in mind?"

"*Ay de mi!*" sighed the old peon. "If your friends really loved you, Pancho, they could not endure to see you risk your life in the *circo* every Sunday. That would break their hearts."

"*Madre,*" exclaimed the fighter impatiently, "you do not understand. Aristocratic friends are not like peon friends. Peons fall in with each other anyhow. Rich or poor, clad or naked, full or hungry, they are always the same; but friendship among aristocrats is more like a game. One must be prepared to play, or *cà,* one can't play! Aristocrats have standards, something to live up to—a fine *casa,* honor, bravery, money. If you fail to have these, out you go among the peons. That is fair. Friendship among the aristocrats is a game, like a bullfight."

"*Valgame Dios!*" cried the old peon woman, throwing up her hands. "Then, my son, is not a peon friend a thousand times better and more faithful than a *caballero* friend?"

"Not at all! The peon is at the bottom, and can lose nothing. Since he has no rank, he requires none. Look at me—I am no longer a peon. I have carved a place for myself among the *caballeros* with my rapier. I hold my place with my rapier. They are my dear friends, naturally, as long as I hold my place. The *caballeros* are really more faithful than the peons. They are faithful to their standards—honor, bravery, power."

"What you call faithfulness to standards," returned the old woman, "is just selfishness. For you to wear fine clothes and spend money on them pleases them, and they won't put up with you unless you do so."

"*Seguramente,* it is as I say—they live to standards, principles. The Son of the Virgin taught us that, *madrecita*—to live for principles."

Angelito crossed himself.

"*Huy,* a fine son you are to say it is religion to desert your friends when they meet misfortune! That is what comes of talking to aristocrats and learning their wickedness!" She tossed the mended trunks point-blank at her son. "There they are! Why were you in such a hurry to get them?"

"I want to return them."

"He can't use them—never again, poor *joven!*"

"I want to carry them to his villa and tell his people that he has gone to the Tuy."

The old woman looked at the fighter sharply.

"*Cà!* You are going to carry them to the villa?"

"Yes," nodded Angelito, a little uncomfortably. "Yes—I must return them to his sister."

The old lottery ticket vender grimaced.

"*Caramba,* do you imagine she would look twice at you if it wasn't for your money and your *casa?* What a fool you are, Pancho! You say yourself the aristocrats care for nothing except what you can give them, and then you jump about and cry, 'Hurry, *madre!* Get the trunks fixed, *madre!*'—and off you rush to the villa to speak to this fortune hunter!"

Angelito's swarthy skin darkened.

"No, I am not a fool, *madre.* When you are an aristocrat, you try to get what you want. It is a game. If she did not get money and a villa, she would lose her place. If I did not marry some soft, pale girl in silk, I would lose my place. I say it is a game, *madre,* like bullfighting. There is a great deal more in bullfighting than just the money you get out of it, and there is a great deal more in marrying an aristocrat than just the name and power she brings you. Marriage to an aristocrat is a fine thing in itself, and that's why name and power go with it."

The old woman got up with furious tears in her eyes.

"*Demonio!* I'm sorry I ever fixed the dirty things for you!"

The *torero* turned out of the room into the *patio.*

"*Diablo!* I don't see why I ever stop to talk to you!"

Angelito made a bundle of the clothes and started out of the *casa,* wondering whether he ought to withhold the knowledge of Rafael's injuries from the Jiminez family. On his way out he stopped in the front room, to see the poet. A sister of mercy at the bedside beckoned him not to enter. Then she rose and came to the door herself.

"Señor Jiminez had a very bad night," she whispered, glancing at her patient. "He was delirious, and kept calling for pencil and paper."

"*Pobrecito!*" said the *torero.* "He wanted to write something."

"*Sí, señor.* Then he began repeating some poetry, and wanted me to take his dictation. Finally I gave him some powders just before daylight. He is still asleep."

"Poetry!" mused the bullfighter, looking at Rafael's shadowy face among the pillows.

He could not understand how the setting of words in line could so burn a man up with desire.

"Is he going to get well?" he whispered to the sister.

"He is young, *señor,* and God is very merciful to the young."

She crossed herself with a hand roughened from service.

"I am going to his house," explained Angelito. "He asked me not to tell his mother and sister."

"Is his mother an invalid?" asked the nurse.

"I—don't know," hesitated Angelito, a little dubious about telling the sister a falsehood.

The nun noiselessly returned to her seat at the bedside. Angelito picked up his bundle and moved slowly out of the *casa*. In the *calle* he hailed a passing cab and set out for Paraiso.

As Angelito rode southward, he knew that the Señora and the Señorita Jiminez would immediately find the rents in the clothing. He began inventing a story to answer the questions which they would most certainly ask. He decided to say that a *novillo* had flung him on the fence and had torn his clothing. Then he would add, as if from a sudden memory:

"Oh, yes, and I forgot to tell you that Rafael has gone down to the Jiminez estate on the Tuy. He said he would be there for a few days."

The bullfighter thought that this would give Rafael's absence an inconsequential air.

"Oh, yes, I forgot to tell you—"

And all the while he would be handing in the torn garments, and Rafael would be lying, pale and shadowy, in Angelito's front room, with the ghastly tubes running into him and out of him.

"He is staying down on the Tuy for a few days, looking after the Jiminez estate —*caramba!*"

By the time he had the details of his story worked out, the driver was halting beside the high stone pillars and the tall iron fence of the Jiminez villa. Directing the cabman to follow with the bundle, Angelito opened the big gate and set out down the path toward the house.

(*To be continued in the January number of* MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE)

MYRTILLA WALKING

SHE walks like the swaying wheat
  On a summer afternoon;
The glancing of her feet
  Goes to an unheard tune.
As thus she floats along,
Her walking makes a song;
And sometimes the gay breeze
  Of her melodious going
Hints at her ivory knees
  And other pretty showing.

Earth's loveliest fairy things
  Surround her as she goes;
Warble of hidden springs
  Attend her on her way;
  Yea, the vainglorious rose
Loses itself in her,
  And the bright singing day
Forgets aught else is fair;
And I—ah, I, alas!—
Am lowlier than the grass,
O'er which, all careless, pass
  Her little dancing feet,
Nor reck it is my heart
  That there doth beat.
Of love she hath no care
  As she walks like the swaying wheat!

Richard Leigh

Benedicta

AND HOW SHE DISCOVERED JUST WHAT IT WAS THAT SHE HAD ALWAYS WANTED

By Elisabeth Sanxay Holding

WHEN the charming prince at last cut his way through the enchanted forest, and set foot in that silent palace, the sleeping beauty was delighted to be waked with a kiss. It is not difficult, however, to imagine some beauties who would prefer to be left in dismal, cobwebby peace—beauties who had grown so used to sleep that waking would be a pain and a shock. It is pitiful to think of the poor young prince in a case like that—except that princes are almost always fortunate in the end, and probably know that they will be.

The real sleeping beauty, you will perhaps remember, had a spell put on her at her christening by a disgruntled fairy. If ever she touched a distaff, she would prick herself and die. Another and a better fairy interfered, and arranged that, instead of death, an enchanted sleep should overtake the princess; and so it happened. In vain the royal parents prohibited distaffs. Curses are very, very hard to avoid, and the poor, lovely girl did find a distaff, and did prick her finger, and did fall asleep, and so did every other living creature in the palace with her, to stand or sit or lie just where they were for I don't remember how many years.

Benedicta had nothing to do with fairies, and she wouldn't have known a distaff if she had seen one; nevertheless, at the time when this story begins, she had been going about for years in a sort of enchanted slumber. She didn't know that it was a slumber. She called it dignity, and pride, and so on, and clung most tenaciously to her twilight existence.

She was a tall, disdainful creature, very pretty, if you had the courage to look at her; but the people of Elderfield were so well used to her that they had no particular wish to look at her. She was simply Miss Benedicta Miller, from the old Miller place, and the Millers had ceased to be interesting long before she was born.

They had been rich, but now they were poor. They were very tiresome about it, too, keeping up a moldy, lamentable sort of state in their dilapidated house, turning up their noses at every one new and friendly, and being frightfully sensitive toward all the " old " people who offered them any courtesy.

There were only two of them left now—Benedicta and her father. Mr. Miller had grown so sensitive and squeamish and absurd that he was practically invisible, and was very nearly forgotten. The more he saw that he was forgotten, the more hurt and resentful he became, and the less would he come out into the world.

Some one had to come out, however. They couldn't be *Robinson Crusoes* on a farm where nothing grew any more. They had to buy what they wanted, and, to do so, Benedicta had to go to the village.

This she did two or three times a week in a little car, beautifully polished and cared for, as she cared for everything. She would come rattling down Main Street, and no amount of jouncing could make her look anything but dignified, just as no hat, however old and unbecoming, could destroy the beauty of her proud little head and fine features. She would enter a shop and give a pitiful little order; and because she remembered what a wonderful family the Millers had once been, and because she was so miserable at their present eclipse, and so ashamed of herself for being miserable, she would be quite cold and curt.

Then home she would go, to her father, who always asked her what was the news. She knew what sort of news he wanted to hear—that some one had inquired about him, or sent a message; but no one did that any more.

They would sit down to a meager little lunch cooked by the cheapest servant obtainable. Though Benedicta herself could have cooked one ten times better, it would have choked them. Even the heartbreaking bills that came had to be presented to Mr. Miller on a silver tray.

Benedicta admired her father beyond measure, and agreed with him that the only self-respecting thing for them was to hide their shameful poverty from the rest of the world; but he was fifty, and she was only twenty-three, so that sometimes she was not able to find quite the same satisfaction in solitary pride that he did. She kept up the tradition splendidly, but she didn't always relish it.

For instance, when that Wilkinson girl had come to see her, uninvited and unencouraged, she had found it difficult to be courteously disagreeable every instant. She had to be constantly reminding herself that the Wilkinsons were impossible people who had been retail grocers when the Millers were in their prime. She had also had to remind herself that this jolly, friendly girl was not, could not be, really friendly, but had doubtless come to spy upon their poverty and to laugh about it afterward.

When, from the window, she had watched her visitor drive off in a smart little roadster, tears came to Benedicta's eyes—not tears of envy, but of genuine regret that the pride of the Millers forbade her to like Miss Wilkinson. Her life seemed duller and mustier than ever.

II

Nevertheless, instead of being pleased, Benedicta was affronted when the impossible girl came back. It was late one June afternoon, in the bright and tranquil hour before the sun goes down, and Benedicta, weary and idle, was in the sitting room, because it was proper for her to be in the sitting room.

She looked out of the window, because she was thoroughly tired of looking at the room. The fact of its being filled with genuine Colonial furniture of fine mahogany gave her no pleasure at all. The landscape, too, was uninspiring—a straggling, neglected garden, and a stretch of fields which had once been part of the Miller estate, but which had been first rented and then sold to farmers who did not object to working.

Something was coming along the road. She recognized the smart little roadster. It turned in at their gateway and stopped before their door.

It was a memorable interview. Indeed, it was a battle, and Miss Wilkinson conquered. In the most ordinary way, she made a preposterous suggestion.

"I want you to spend this week-end with us," she said. "Please do!"

Benedicta, almost overcome, said that she had never spent a night away from home.

"Then begin now," said Miss Wilkinson. "Please come! It's going to be awfully nice. Two—"

"I'm sure it would be nice, but I really can't," said Benedicta firmly.

Miss Wilkinson seemed perfectly unaware that it is bad manners to press an invitation. She had taken a fancy to Benedicta's dark beauty, with her sulky mouth and her unhappy eyes, and she was sorry for her. She kept on urging until Benedicta was obliged to point out to her that invitations must come not from daughters, but from mothers, and that she was not acquainted with Mrs. Wilkinson.

"All right!" said the other good-humoredly. "Then mother 'll come to-morrow and ask you."

"But—" Benedicta began.

She found it hard to go on. Impossible as Miss Wilkinson was, it was difficult to dislike her. The idea of a week-end in her company was terribly tempting. It was an invitation to be young for a little while.

"But," Benedicta went on more gently, "you see, you live so near, it really seems absurd to stay overnight. I should like very much to come some afternoon—"

Miss Wilkinson had said a week-end, and a week-end she intended to have.

"If I could get her away from this ghastly house, the girl would be entirely different," she thought. "Poor thing! She really wants to come, too."

So she kept at it, and, being an obstinate creature, accustomed to her own way, she at last obtained Benedicta's reluctant consent.

"I'll come for you on Friday, before dinner," she said gayly.

Off she went, well pleased with herself, and with Benedicta, and with almost everything else in the world.

But Mr. Miller! Better to pass over that interview, for it accomplished nothing except to make both father and daughter very miserable. Even Mr. Miller was forced to admit that, as the invitation had been accepted, nothing could be done. All the Millers did what they said they would do, no matter how disastrous the consequences. All he wished was to say what he thought of this undignified, improper proceeding, and he did so.

III

WILKINSONS being kind to a Miller! Mrs. Wilkinson conducting Benedicta to a charming little bedroom, and actually kissing her at the door! Mr. Wilkinson meeting her in the dining room and saying:

"It's a pleasure to see the daughter of Mr. Hamilton Miller in my house. Your father was one of my earliest customers."

Mr. Wilkinson saying this, and not seeming at all ashamed of having had customers! Nan—that was Miss Wilkinson's name—doing everything possible to make her somewhat difficult guest feel at home!

When at last she was left alone in her room to dress for dinner, Benedicta had to struggle with a great desire to cry, for ridiculous reasons—because Mrs. Wilkinson had kissed her, because the room itself was so pretty, furnished in white and lit by a rose-shaded lamp, because she was touched, and was ashamed of herself for being touched. She reminded herself that she had come as a favor to Nan, and against her own will. She remembered that everything in her chilly, bleak little room at home was an heirloom.

"I ought to have more poise," she told herself sternly.

When she came down to dinner, she had perhaps a little too much poise. The Wilkinsons all kept on being kind, because it was natural to them, and because they knew all about the Millers and understood Benedicta; but the other guests saw in her nothing but a very stiff, cool, silent girl in a dowdy frock, and they didn't like her.

There were two girls and three others, whom Nan called "boys," but who were what Benedicta considered young men, and very frivolous ones. Three men and four girls!

"Of course, I'm the extra one," she thought. "It doesn't matter to me, of course."

She felt still more extra and superfluous after dinner, when they began to dance as a matter of course. One of the men asked her to dance, but she declined. She told Mrs. Wilkinson that she didn't care for dancing, but the truth was that she knew nothing but waltzes and two-steps, which were of no more use than minuets. It wouldn't do, though, for a Miller to confess herself ignorant of the art.

So she sat beside her hostess, consoling herself with pride, and finding it a very dismal sort of thing. Indeed, she was scarcely able to speak, for fear the unsteadiness in her voice might betray her misery.

"Oh, why did I come?" she asked herself. "Oh, why, why didn't I stay home, and not know how happy every one else is? Here I just have to sit and look on. I'm young, too! Oh, I wish I wasn't! I wish I was old—old, like father. Then I wouldn't care!"

"Here's some one else who doesn't care for dancing," remarked Mrs. Wilkinson, and beckoned to a newcomer who had strolled casually in through the open French window. "It's Francis Dumall. You know the Dumalls, don't you?"

The history of the Dumalls had been familiar to Benedicta from her infancy. Like the Millers, they had come down in the world; but not sadly and slowly like the Millers, or generation by generation. Paul Dumall had caused the disaster alone and unaided, and had brought down his family with a crash.

There was nothing discreditable in the debacle. Dumall had ruined himself like a gentleman, and had aroused nothing but sympathy. What is more, he had died before becoming *vieux jeu*, like poor Mr. Miller, and he was now a sort of legend. His wife and child had gone away, no one knew where.

"And this must be the son," thought Benedicta.

She was pleased and a little excited at the idea of meeting some one with a history so like her own — some one fallen from greatness like herself, suffering the same humiliation and sadness. She would have liked this young man, even if he hadn't been so very likable.

He was a tall, slight fellow, a perfect Dumall, with gray eyes, fair hair, and the fine, big Dumall nose. He was not handsome, but he was agreeable to look at, because of his kind and rather shy smile, and the sensitive intelligence of his face.

He was presented to Benedicta, and they looked at each other with rather artless curiosity. How many Millers and Dumalls had met in the past, in circumstances so different! Indeed, a Dumall had once married a Miller, long ago, so that they were distantly related.

"Sit down, Francis," said the hospitable Mrs. Wilkinson.

The affection in her manner impressed Benedicta. It was obvious that Mrs. Wilkinson had a great regard for this boy. His dinner jacket was shabby, his fair hair was a little ruffled, he had none of the sleek elegance of the other guests; and yet his hostess showed him a sort of deference not given to the others.

"It's his family, of course," thought Benedicta. "She ought to remember that the Millers were just the same!"

In spite of their mutual interest, the two young people were constrained and silent when Mrs. Wilkinson left them alone. Benedicta knew that she ought to talk and be gracious and entertaining, but she completely lacked practice. Young Dumall made no effort whatever, but sat looking at the dancers in the next room, not enviously or wistfully, but in a calm and thoughtful way.

"Don't you care for it, either?" he asked suddenly.

That "either" pleased Benedicta. It seemed to place her with Dumall in another and superior world. It made her feel that she really didn't care for dancing; so she said:

"No."

"Sometimes I think people have forgotten how to enjoy themselves," he went on. "They did know long ago, in Greece. They danced out in the sun, and did it beautifully. They were happy, instead of simply being excited."

Benedicta looked with amazement at his boyish face, but he did not look at her. He was staring ahead of him with a strange, lost look that fascinated her, and was talking earnestly of Greek festivals, now and then using a Greek word.

From the next room Nan caught sight of her, and was impressed.

"Look at Miss Miller!" she said to her partner. "Isn't she lovely?"

Benedicta was, just then. She was listening to young Dumall with shining eyes and parted lips, entranced by his words. She thought he was marvelous.

Well, perhaps he was. Another listener might have found him a little dogmatic and immature; but, after all, he did think, and he did imagine, and he had a rare and fine admiration for the perished beauties of the ancient world. He knew his facts, too. He had studied honestly and intelligently.

When he rose to go, darkness fell upon Benedicta.

"Aren't you staying in the house?" she asked.

"No," he answered. She knew very well that he was looking at her, although she seemed unaware of it. "I have to go into the city to-morrow, to buy some books; but I'll be here on Sunday afternoon again. I—I hope I'll see you then!"

IV

On Sunday evening Benedicta pretended that she was sleepy; and when Mrs. Wilkinson told her to go to bed, and get a good night's rest, she assented willingly. As a matter of fact, she thought that very likely she would never go to sleep again. Certainly she didn't want to waste time in that way.

She sat down in the dark by the window, where she could look out over the garden, but she didn't see it. She had abolished time and space, and was looking into the middle of the afternoon that had passed.

She saw herself and Francis Dumall sitting on a fallen tree in the woods, where the sun shone through the leaves in queer bright spots on his hair, like gold coins. He was dressed in an old belted coat and tweed trousers that didn't match, but his shabby clothes were worn with his own air of careless distinction. He was hatless. Sometimes he looked like a boy, and sometimes very much of a man.

He had talked about books. He had talked in an enthralling, a marvelous way. He had made Benedicta resolve to begin to read books herself.

"Why have I gone on like this?" she thought. "Never even trying to improve my mind, with all the spare time I've had! It's disgraceful. I'm ashamed of myself. I don't know what Mr. Dumall must think of me!"

This was somewhat hypocritical, for she had at least a suspicion of what Mr. Dumall thought of her. He hadn't talked about books all the time; nor was it likely that when he had asked if he might come to see her, he had contemplated nothing but a literary monologue.

In spite of this, however, and in spite of the look in his gray eyes, which was unmistakably admiration, Benedicta was doubtful.

" He can't really like me," she thought.

She did not realize how unworthy of a Miller such humility was. Why shouldn't he really like her? What was he but a boy not much older than herself, and, like herself, obscure and poor? She didn't even realize how lovely she was, lost in her ridiculous admiration for him.

" He's so different from me!" she thought. " He's not ashamed of being poor. He doesn't care one bit about clothes, and dancing, and things like that. He could hold his own anywhere. Everybody respects him and likes him. Nan thinks he's splendid. He *is* splendid! He's risen above his disadvantages, and I haven't. I've let myself be so miserable about being poor that I've neglected everything else. He remembers that he belongs to a fine old family, and he's worthy of it!"

She must follow this inspiring example. She must be worthy of her fine, old family. She wished the magic summer night would pass so that she might begin. She was filled with impatience and hope, half happy, half miserable.

She began to dream of the past, when the Dumalls and the Millers were in their prime, when the two houses blazed with lights in the evening and were filled with guests, when the estates were intact, when the ladies exchanged visits, riding along the roads in carriages, and all the country people uncovered as they passed. All gone now—gone forever!

" I don't care!" she said, wiping away a tear. " I'd rather have what I have than ten times the Wilkinsons' money!"

The result of her meditations was to make her none too gracious to the Wilkinsons the next morning. She took leave of them, firmly resolving never to set foot in their house again, because it wasn't worthy of a Miller. She was going home to improve her mind, and never to see or think of any one less august than a Dumall for the rest of her life.

" She's a high and mighty young woman, I must say!" observed Mr. Wilkinson, a little hurt by her patronizing farewell.

His wife and daughter were not hurt. They said in the same breath:

" Poor Benedicta!"

" Why?" he wished to know.

They didn't explain, but the thought both of them had was that it is a lamentable piece of folly to bite off one's nose to spite one's face, especially in the case of such a delightful nose and such a pretty face as Benedicta's.

V

ONCE inside the Miller stronghold again, Benedicta went from bad to worse. Her father confirmed and strengthened all her theories. He was inordinately interested to hear that she had met young Dumall, and he remembered any number of new things about the two families.

When they sat down to their ill cooked, meager dinner, the fact that it hadn't been paid for was amply compensated by eating it with old silver from old china. Mr. Miller, looking at his child, had not a single pang of regret that her youth and her loveliness were shut up in that dismal ruin. He felt, instead, a surge of pride and gratitude that she was a Miller.

Young Dumall came that very evening, bringing a book for Benedicta; but he did not show the least desire for a decorous conversation on family topics with her father.

In spite of his scholarly tastes and his shy, quiet air, he was a young fellow of enterprise and resolution. He suggested taking a walk, for the inadequate reason that the moon was up. So Mr. Miller was left alone—which, after all, was the fate he had chosen for himself.

Benedicta had fixed ideas about courtships. It cannot be denied that, although she had seen this young man only twice, and had no proper foundation for such a notion, she believed that this was the beginning of a courtship. The most singular delight and confusion filled her heart. She didn't wish to speak, or wish him to speak. Later, after they had known each other for weeks and weeks, would come the moment when he would tell her those wonderful things of which she had read; but now all she wanted in the world was to walk by his side on the long, dim road, soft with dust, with the crickets chirping in the parched grass, and the breeze, sweet with the breath of the fields and the hills, blowing against her face.

Young Dumall, apparently, had no such ideas about courtships.

"You know," he said, "I'm poor enough—"

"Oh!" Benedicta interrupted. "What does that matter? It's something to be proud of—in these days, when people like the Wilkinsons have so much money."

He turned toward her, but it was too dark to read her face.

"I don't see anything wrong with the Wilkinsons," he said. "They're the best friends I've ever had."

Benedicta was a little nettled at this.

"Of course they're very nice, and all that," she answered; "but they're not at all our sort."

"That's our misfortune," declared Francis. "Mr. Wilkinson made money because he worked hard and used his wits. Our sort of people wouldn't work, and thought it a fine thing not to have any common sense. *I'm* not proud of being poor—and I'm not going to stay poor!"

"There are better things in life than hard work and common sense," observed Benedicta stiffly.

"I know that," said he; "but you can't get or keep those better things without hard work and common sense. Valuable things have to be paid for."

"The very best things can't be bought," said she.

"You can't get them any other way," said he.

Benedicta was growing rather angry.

"Not good blood," she said. "Not family and traditions."

"But, see here!" he interposed. "Haven't you ever heard or read how the people we came from—the old Millers and the Dumalls—got what we're so proud of now? They bought all they ever had. They often paid with their lives, and always with the hardest, most dangerous kind of service. After they'd come to this country and cleared their land, they had to defend it. All the Dumalls who amounted to anything were fighters in one way or another—not necessarily soldiers, but men who held their own. When they stopped fighting—and paying—they didn't amount to anything any more. I don't intend to spend my life talking about what other and better men have done before me. I'm a man myself, and I mean to do something worth doing!"

Benedicta was a traitor. She agreed with every word he said. She was so thrilled by his boyish spirit that she could have wept with pride and joy. She thought to herself that he was like a knight, that he was the bravest, finest, most wonderful creature who had ever walked the earth.

"I'm sure you will!" she cried.

He stopped short.

"Do you really think so, Benedicta?" he asked.

He called her Benedicta, and his voice—

"Yes," she answered, very low.

"Benedicta," he said again, "I can't say what I want to say to you just now—not yet; but if I thought—I could do anything in the world if it was for *you!*"

It was necessarily a very long walk, with so much to be said. Benedicta came home with a hole walked through one of her best slippers; but she had heard the important things necessary for her to know. She had heard exactly why he felt that way, and at what instant he had begun to feel that way. She had given him permission to go ahead and do anything in the world for her; and he had kissed her—an awkward little kiss—when they said good night at the gate.

VI

Benedicta awoke to a rainy morning, but it was not the sort of rain that had hitherto fallen upon the earth. It was sweet, fresh, exhilarating. The sound of it drumming on the roof was as gay as martial music.

All the old wearisome things were gone out of her life, and the new ones had scarcely begun. She felt wonderfully free and spirited, like a person on a journey who has got as far as the railway station—who is definitely away from home, but still in familiar country.

She was thinking of nothing but Francis Dumall, the knight, the adventurer, the man determined to do something worth doing. She could imagine nothing in the modern world quite splendid enough for him to do. It was brave to be an aviator, but it wasn't important enough. A statesman? Not picturesque enough. A writer? Not sufficiently active or daring.

"But he'll have thought of something," she reflected. "I know he has his life all planned. I wonder why I didn't ask him about that, instead of about—other things. It's because I'm frivolous and silly!"

Even that didn't depress her. She was so full of hope and courage this morning that it seemed the simplest thing in the world to acquire wisdom at once. She intended to buy and read a new book this very day, so that she might talk about it to the incomparable Francis in the evening; and this not from any desire to show off, or to impress him, but simply from an honest and touching wish to follow him, to go at his pace, to prove her sympathy with his aims.

She had never bought a book in her life. It had been difficult enough—impossible, at times—to buy the barest necessities; and what they did get was usually procured on credit in mysterious ways by Mr. Miller.

Money of her own was a thing unknown to Benedicta. Nevertheless, she went in the calmest way and asked her father for a little. Mr. Miller was equally calm when he gave her all he had. Indeed, he forgot the present moment, and felt himself one of the old Millers making a lavish gift to a daughter whose hand was sought by a scion of the Dumalls.

It didn't matter that she went rattling off in her little car along muddy roads. She couldn't have been lovelier in a coach with footmen. The rain blew against her face and made it beautifully rosy. Her dark hair became a little loosened under her wide hat.

When she sprang out, and went into the butcher's, he was astounded by this new aspect of the high and mighty Miss Miller. To tell the truth, he felt more respect and admiration for her happy youth than he had ever felt for her Millerness.

"Mr. Schultz," she said eagerly, "can you tell me where there's a book shop?"

Mr. Schultz had an educated son who bought books. He told her that for the first time in many years there was now a book shop in Elderfield, and a good one, too, just behind the post office.

"It's—" he began, but she thanked him, and hurried off.

It was a trim, attractive little shop, with a striped awning, and in the window were displayed books as fresh and tempting as the first delectable fruits in spring. No bookworm was Benedicta, however. She pulled up the little car smartly, jumped out, and entered the shop with a brisk and resolute air.

"Have you a copy of—" she began, addressing the young man who came forward.

Then she stopped short with a gasp. It was Francis Dumall!

"Benedicta!" he cried. "This is the best thing that ever happened; I never thought of seeing you on a rainy day like this! Benedicta! How especially pretty you look!"

"But—" she faltered. "But I didn't know—I didn't think—you never told me you were here in a place like this!"

"Didn't I?" he answered, with an air of triumph. "Well, take a good look at it, Benedicta! It's my own!"

"Your—shop? *You* have a *shop?*"

He mistook her horror for incredulous admiration.

"Fact!" he said. "Mr. Wilkinson set me up six months ago, and I'm doing even better than I expected. I tell you, Benedicta, I'm really making the people here sit up and take notice that there are such things as books in this world. A fellow told me the other day that I was doing splendid missionary work. Why, look here, Benedicta—"

And he went on, showing her things, explaining, taking up books and opening them, and never noticing her frozen silence.

A customer came in. He sold her the book she wanted, and another which she hadn't wanted before. A Dumall waiting on customers! A shopkeeper! That was what Benedicta's knight, her splendid adventurer, was doing — selling books and wrapping them up!

When they were alone again, he sat down on the edge of the table and took both her hands.

"You see, darling, beautiful girl, in a year's time, even if I don't do better than I'm doing now, I'll have paid back Wilkinson, and I'll be standing on my own feet. *Then* I'll be able—"

Benedicta tried to draw away her hands, tried to find words for the anger and bitter disappointment within her; but before she had uttered a syllable, the door opened again and a man entered.

"Dumall," he said, politely ignoring the flushed Benedicta, "I wish you'd come over to the station with me and see that fellow from Cowan's. He's waiting for the up train, but he'd like to see you about that Bijou line of cards."

Young Dumall turned to Benedicta with such a pleased expression.

"You won't be afraid to look after the shop for a quarter of an hour, will you?" he asked earnestly. "You needn't try to sell anything. If any one comes in, show those new books, you know—and keep them talking until I get back."

Before she had time to refuse, he had hurried away on his errand.

VII

A Miller waiting in a shop! No! It was too much!

"I won't do it!" Benedicta thought, angry tears in her eyes. "I'll leave his horrible, vulgar shop! I never want to see him again! So this is what he calls something worth doing! In a year he'll pay back Mr. Wilkinson and be standing on his own feet—"

Somehow the phrase arrested her. Standing on his own feet! Working honestly and faithfully and happily, proud of his work, confident of success, looking forward, instead of back—standing on his own feet!

Benedicta was at the door, with her hand on the latch, but she could not open it. It was as if a crowd of new ideas were holding it fast, keeping her in there. This bright, neat little place, where something was done, instead of remembered — this thing that was being built up, instead of falling into ruins—what had she ever had in her life one-half so fine? After all, wasn't it an adventure, wasn't it a worthy thing to do, to stand on his own feet?

The door was pushed open then, and the next instant the daughter of the Millers was confronted by a customer. Suddenly a strange new desire came over her—a desire to do something, instead of just being herself, a fierce determination to make even the smallest sort of individual effort.

In an instant, Benedicta knew all sorts of things she wasn't aware of knowing. She understood the arrangement of the stock. She knew how to talk to this strange man. She was calm, reasonable, efficient. He wavered, and said he didn't think he would take anything that morning; and she persuaded him! She made a sale!

She wrapped up the book and took the money for it. She kept the coins in her hand and stared at them. The shop was an entirely different place. The whole world was changed. She walked thoughtfully about, she saw improvements that could be made.

"Got it!" cried Dumall boyishly.

"Got what?" asked Benedicta, turning with a slight, preoccupied frown.

"The agency. I'm sorry I had to leave you, Benedicta. I ought to have some sort of assistant, but that 'll have to wait. Now, then, dear girl, let's go out to lunch!"

"And leave the shop?" she inquired.

"I'll close it for an hour. I often do, you know. No one's likely to come in."

"Some one did come in, just now," said Benedicta, "and bought a book." She handed him the money. "So you see," she went on quite sternly, "if there'd been no one here—"

"But I have to. We'll only be gone—"

"I'll stay here while you have lunch."

"But, Benedicta!" he objected. "I want to be with you. Never mind the shop!"

"Francis, I'm ashamed of you!" said she. "The shop shan't be left alone. I—I love it!"

"Love the *shop?*" he asked. "Is that all?"

"Well, anyhow—I'd like to help you, Francis," she murmured. "I'd be glad to come every day until—until you don't need me any more."

Young Dumall looked at her.

"I don't think you know what you're undertaking, Benedicta," he said. "If you're going to come until I don't need you, it's a life job!"

"Do run along and get your lunch!" replied Benedicta, dignified in spite of very flushed cheeks. "I—I believe a job was just what I always wanted, Francis!"

TO MY SOUL

I count my beads of sorrow one by one
In the low twilight, when the day is done.
I count my pearls of anguish slow and true,
Naming the joys my dull life never knew.

I have missed wealth, and, striving, have missed fame—
Missed the fine glory of an honored name;
But what of these, if, in a world of ruth,
I have kept steadfast faith with love and truth?

Elizabeth M. Montague

Service—for Lovers

A SPARKLING COMEDY STAGED BY TWO AMERICANS IN A PARISIAN RESTAURANT

By Reita Lambert

LEAH SPEARE preceded her husband between the lines of richly accoutered tables at Julien's, and the *maître d' hôtel* preceded Leah. It was the dinner hour at Julien's *recherché* and world-famed restaurant, behind whose silk-draped windows a select and exacting Parisian clientele is wont to take its evening meal.

At Julien's, shining silver and snowy damask vie with shining eyes and snowy shoulders. Deep-piled carpet provides a luxurious footing for fragile slippers. From sideboard and serving table, heaped bowls of fruit and *compote* tempt the sated or finical palate.

Leah Speare's progress through the room was the progress of a capricious breeze through a daisy field. As she passed the tables, heads turned automatically to pay homage to the beautifully balanced vitality of the charming young *Américaine*.

The *maître d'hôtel* paused beside a small table in the center of the room. He pulled out a chair, and turned to Leah with that meticulous blend of deference and dignity which only a Parisian *maître d'hôtel* knows how to assume; but Paul Speare spoke impatiently.

" We prefer to have a table at the side—over there. Those are not reserved, I presume?"

The dignitary's eyes followed Paul's toward the velvet-upholstered settle that hugged the long room on three sides, and against which tiny tables were drawn cozily. His apologetic shrug said, almost abjectly, that he had completely forgotten the very existence of those same tables, desirable though they might be.

" But of course, if *monsieur* prefers," he succumbed contritely.

Paul said shortly that they did prefer, and the trio edged their way toward the settle. A table was pulled out, and pushed in immediately against their knees. Leah sighed, shrugged off her wrap, and fumbled lazily with her gloves.

" Well, it *is* good to sit down!"

" You do look a trifle fagged, dear," Paul admitted anxiously. " Why you try to crowd so much into one day—"

" But since we're in Paris for such a short time! And I can't get clothes anywhere else that are fantastic enough to shock the natives!"

Paul's eyes rested fondly on his wife's lovely face. Six months of marriage had only served to fan the flame of his ardor to a more luminous and steady glow.

" Well, if you will be so vain," he reproved quizzically.

She threw him a reproachful glance. At the same moment her eyes encountered the lowest button on the white vest of an attentively waiting *garçon*. Her lips pursed in a pout.

" Good gracious, I haven't even looked at the menu yet!"

Paul glanced up at the figure hovering over them. He waved him off with an impatient gesture.

" *Madame* isn't ready to order."

The American's words were unintelligible to the well-intentioned *garçon*, but the gesture was adequate, and he moved sadly away.

" *Why* they try to hurry you—" Leah was still busy with her gloves, and left the conjecture in the air. " My dear, I bought the duckiest little hat from Maurice to-day—chic enough to cause a traffic jam on the avenue when we get home. Sets over one ear—"

" *Purée de pois*," read Paul absently from the card in his hand.

His wife made a wry face.

"Oh, peas! Can't you find something a little more original, dear? We can have pea soup all the rest of our lives. And oh, Paul, you should see the earrings at Louis's! A foot long! Oh, here's another waiter, and I don't know *what* I want to eat!"

"If you could just decide on your soup, dearest," suggested Paul amiably.

"But why do I have to hurry?" grumbled his wife, and picked up the menu. "Might as well be in New York. I don't know—"

"*Un instant!*" Paul threw it over his shoulder, and displayed a triumphant grin to his wife. "Not bad, what? Now take your time, dear."

She ran a slender finger down the side of the card.

"*Potage*—h-m, let me see! *Bisque de tomates*—that's just plain tomato bisque. Here's *crème d'endive aux croûtons*—h-m, that sounds interesting. Endive in soup, fancy! Let's try some."

"Good!" Her husband raised his head. "By golly, he's gone!"

"Now isn't that like them?" demanded Leah crossly. "Buzz around when you don't want them, and then disappear just when you do. *Now* I'm beginning to get hungry."

Paul was beckoning peremptorily to the *maître d'hôtel,* who was moving grandly about among the tables, like a peripatetic monument of splendor. He came swiftly—as swiftly as his ineffable hauteur would permit—in response to the summons.

"*Oui, monsieur,* is it that there might be something—"

"Our waiter—he's gone," announced Paul crisply.

The *maître d'hôtel* was mildly distressed.

"A thousand pardons! I shall send him to you at once."

"He didn't seem exactly broken-hearted about it," observed Leah dryly. "Now why do you suppose our waiter vanished when you told him to wait?"

Her husband was regarding her with a hint of amusement in his eyes.

"They must have guessed, my dear."

"Guessed what?" she asked, fumbling for her powder box.

"That we are married."

"And so we are!" She raised her lashes to give him a fleeting glimpse of her joy in the fact.

"And so we are," echoed Paul fervently; "but it's a fatal handicap in a Paris restaurant, you see."

"No, I don't see," denied Leah, cocking her elbows on the table and resting a piquant chin on her clasped hands. "You're being cryptic, and I'm starved. What's the difference between being married in a Paris restaurant and one, say, in Hartford, Connecticut?"

"The difference," explained her husband sentiently, "between good service and bad—between devotion and indifference."

"You mean they're being inattentive because they think we're married?" she demanded, a gleam of interest making its appearance in her eyes.

"Exactly," admitted Paul. "We've lost our glamour. In Paris, when you achieve matrimony, you forfeit the prestige accorded love."

"My dear!" His wife's eyes reproved him. "You're talking as if, just because we're married, we didn't—love!"

"Darling, I'm doing nothing of the sort. What we *feel* doesn't count. It's what we *show.*"

"Oh, my goodness!" cried Leah, in mock dismay. "You're being indelicate, I do believe!"

"I'm being philosophical," corrected Paul, with a chuckle. "You know the adage—all the world loves a lover? Well, I shouldn't wonder if it hadn't originated in France."

"Frightfully blasé!" she commented, but her eyes were dancing. "And how can they tell that we're married, Solomon?"

"Because we—well," he grinned slyly, "I can't very well explain—here."

"Ah, that's just it. I have the answer!" She clapped her hands softly. "If you could and *did,* they'd—"

"They'd hop, no doubt!" finished Paul, significantly.

She leaned swiftly toward him.

"You might tell me that you loved me."

"I might," he agreed.

"You might even *show* it!"

"I might indeed."

"And *I* might vamp you—openly," she threatened, highly entertained by the audacity of the idea.

Her husband's eyes challenged her.

"You might even," he suggested in a helpful whisper, "act as if you wanted to kiss me!"

"That's easy," she returned recklessly, "because I do!"

"Well?" He dared her. "Well?"

The faint clatter of dishes, the *pad, pad,* of waiters' feet on the soft carpet, the gentle babble of mellifluous French, and the musical gurgle of women's laughter, washed over them unheeded. Beyond the silk-draped windows lay Paris, preening herself for the eagerly awaited advent of summer—Paris, arch and languorous—Paris, redolent of fresh-plucked violets and the muscadine of stripped vineyards; but Paul and Leah had forgotten Paris—forgotten the source of their conjectural wanderings—forgotten Julien's.

"I am in love with you, you know," whispered Leah, her eyes daring him to deny it. "I am!"

II

THE *garçon,* who had sidled silently to their table in obedience to the orders of the *maître d'hôtel,* paused, while a beatific smile overspread his broad face. True, the language of the foreigners was strange and unintelligible, but the language of love—of lips and eyes and touching fingers—is always the same in any tongue. What *garçon,* be he young or old, can resist the lure of romance?

Pencil poised over his pad, sleek dark head tilted deferentially, as if fearful of missing a single word, he bent over them.

"*Mademoiselle a commandé?*"

The words rode into their consciousness softly, gently, as if bestowing tender homage, as if inviting tender confidences. Their eyes fell apart guiltily, and hot color rushed into Leah's cheeks.

Paul was the first to recover his poise. He shot a delighted glance at his wife that said:

"You see!"

Leah had already taken her cue from that reverently hovering figure beside the table. She laid a hand on her husband's arm in full view of Julien's select clientele, and bent languidly toward him.

"*You* order, darling," she besought clearly. "Order something nice—as only *you* can, *mon amour!*"

As she had intended, the endearment spoken in his own familiar tongue brought the *garçon* to his hypothetical knees.

"We-ll!" Paul's eyes, full of repressed laughter, were wavering between his wife's rapt face and the menu in his hand. "Suppose we try the endive soup, dearest? You thought you might like that."

She gave him a ravishing smile and patted his arm affectionately.

"Perfect, beloved! It is enough that you suggest it."

"If I might, perhaps, be of some little assistance—"

It was the *maître d'hôtel* who had drifted like a silent, substantial ghost to their table, and was speaking with ingratiating gentleness.

"If I might perhaps suggest the *crème de palmiers.* It has of all soups the most exquisite delicacy of flavor. If *mademoiselle* pleases?"

"Oh, but of course I please!" cried Leah. "Shall it be *crème de palmiers, adoré?*"

"By all means, sweetheart," agreed Paul promptly. "Perhaps the *maître d'hôtel* has something else to suggest."

The *maître d'hôtel* had indeed something else to suggest. He bent over them with a furtive glance over his shoulder that had the effect of inclosing them in a little circle of secrecy.

"There is *riz de veau, monsieur,*" he whispered earnestly. "You know it, perhaps? All the world knows Julien's *riz de veau en casserole.*"

"Heavenly!" gushed Leah, and brought her head daringly close to Paul's. "Shall all the world know what we do not, my love?" And in a whisper she translated: "Sweetbreads, darling."

He patted her hand tenderly.

"*Riz de veau* by all means, little one!"

The face of the *maître d'hôtel* wore the look of an inspired seraph. The awed *garçon* was scribbling busily on his little pad.

"And champagne, darling—shall we have champagne?"

"Ah, *monsieur!*" The voice of the *maître d'hôtel* was heartrending in its distress. "*Not* champagne, *monsieur,* when there is Nuits! You know Nuits, *monsieur?*" He kissed the tips of his fingers, and the pupils of his eyes disappeared momentarily beneath the upper lids. "The wine of the gods!"

"Then," gurgled Leah, clasping her hands rapturously, "it is the wine for us, is it not, *mon chéri?*"

"Above all others," agreed Paul. "Bring us Nuits!"

By this time the menu had become an uninspired and superfluous bit of cardboard, a manual for the unfavored and uninitiated. There were, it now appeared, delectable viands to be concocted for the fastidious and appreciative diner by a heaven-endowed *chef* at the right word from the *maître d'hôtel.*

Finally, the list complete, that omnipotent functionary hurried respectfully away, with the impressed *garçon* in his wake. Paul's eyes sought his wife's, luminous with delight.

"You see!" he said.

"Oh, my dear, they all think we're—lovers!"

"We are!" he declared fervently.

"And am I doing nicely?"

"You're ravishing!"

"I feel," she confided, her lips close to his ear, "for all the world like a *cocotte!*"

"And you *look* like an angel."

"Oh, never!" she denied. "They wouldn't be looking."

"Who's looking?" demanded Paul Speare belligerently.

"Everybody — especially those of the masculine persuasion."

"Well, they'd better not!"

"Indeed they shall!" she cried gleefully, and tapped his cheek lightly with her fingers. "Naughty Paul!"

"For the love of Pete, Leah!"

She smiled archly upon him, and raised her voice.

"You are looking so handsome, beloved, so *charmant!*"

Her husband gasped, and cast a furtive look about him. Half the eyes in their immediate vicinage were leveled upon their table.

"You see, all the world loves a lover!" chanted Leah maliciously.

"But, Leah—"

"Oh, look!"

Their *garçon* was bearing down upon them, in his hands something that looked like a diminutive doll's table.

"*Un petit banc pour mademoiselle!*" he announced gently, and slipped the little stool beneath Leah's feet.

They had not recovered from this when the *maître d'hôtel* appeared, a bus boy in his wake, the latter burdened with a cone-shaped basket, within which was cradled a bottle shrouded with dust and cobwebs.

"The Nuits!" breathed Leah.

The pouring of this precious beverage was a ritual reserved for the *maître d'hôtel* himself. First the cork must be extracted.

"Very old, *monsieur!*" he confided, the basket cuddled lovingly in his arm.

Then a few drops were poured into Paul's glass, before Leah's glass was filled with rich red liquid that looked for all the world like melted velvet. Both glasses filled, and the basket set reverently down, the *maître d'hôtel* rubbed his hands together noiselessly, and gazed fondly upon Leah's smiling face.

"Anything else that *mademoiselle* may perhaps desire — *anything!*" he murmured benevolently.

"*Is* there anything that you desire, my love?" repeated Paul.

"Nothing, since I have *you*—and the Nuits," she assured him.

Picking up his glass, she delicately set her lips to its brim, and extended it with a languishing gesture.

"To sweeten it," she explained, and lifted her own glass. "*À toi, mon amour!*"

They drank, eyes clinging merrily over their glasses, while the indulgent *maître d'hôtel* lingered for an instant, as if to confer his benediction, before he moved away.

III

The wine, the soup, the *riz de veau,* the little crisp, golden rolls—all were pervaded by the magic flavor of the impromptu comedy. Latent histrionic ability manifested itself in Paul Speare's sedate young wife to his growing unease. She was irrepressible. Her fingers fluttered about him like restless hummingbirds, now on his sleeve, now on his cheek. The potency of the ruddy Nuits brought warm color into her cheeks and invested her with a sparkling vivacity.

"Oh, look, darling, at the girthy *Armand* over there! He's ogling me!"

"Where?" demanded Paul. He glared contentiously, and impartially, at the masculine diners nearest them. "And I believe you're ogling back!"

"But I *would!*" declared Leah, and sent a radiant smile in the general direction of a plump and baldish provincial, who gulped and wafted her a surreptitious kiss from stubby fingers. "You'll not mind, lamby? Witness our success! Did you ever taste such sweetbreads? Surely love is more effective than francs at Julien's! And see, once more our devoted *garçon* approaches!"

She relaxed languidly against Paul's shoulder; but the smile on her husband's lips was a trifle forced.

"Leah, *dear,* I didn't tell you to—"

"But now," she declared ardently, "I do not have to be told, *mon petit lapin!*"

"For the love of Pete, Leah, if you insist upon keeping this up, do it in English. They can understand French, you know!"

"Of course they can!" She wagged a slender forefinger at him. "Mine is a French rôle! I have it on the best authority that the Parisian *amoureuse* calls her lover 'rabbit,' and even 'cabbage'; but in English it doesn't serve—eh, my little bunny? No, you see it won't do, darling! Ah—*garçon!*"

He had been standing for a full moment, a vicarious participant in this patent romance. Now he bent over the table.

"*Mademoiselle—dessert?*"

"Ah, dessert, of course!" echoed Paul. "How about some fruit or conserve—"

"The moon of my desire," murmured Leah soulfully, "is something cool and soft and gooey."

She raised her eyes, to encounter once more the adoring gaze of the *maître d'hôtel.*

"If I may suggest, there are *profitrolles, mademoiselle.* They are, as you say, cool and soft and of the utmost delicacy. They are, indeed, Julien's *spécialité.*"

Leah was ecstatic.

"If they taste like they sound!" She rolled her eyes in a transport of delight. "We shall try Julien's *spécialité,* eh, *mon petit choux?*"

"And *fromage, mademoiselle?* Brie, perhaps?"

"Brie, to be sure, with the *conserves* of Bar-le-Duc."

"*Oui, merci, mademoiselle!*"

"Which means, my little cabbage," explained Leah slyly, and with another blown kiss from her finger tips, "'yes, and thank you.' You see, he's grateful!"

"And I, my dear," said Paul shortly, "am alarmed. I'm beginning to think the Nuits has gone to your head."

"Nuits? Never. It is love, *petit!*"

"But, my dear Leah"—he was no longer trying to conceal his growing discomfort—"I think we've put this across rather nicely, but there's no need to keep on dotting your 'i's.'"

"Ah, but you wouldn't have me stop *now,* lamby?"

"You're attracting a deuce of a lot of attention!"

"And you're jealous!" she accused blithely.

"I must admit that I don't care for—"

She interrupted him by placing her hand lightly over his lips.

"It isn't what we *feel,*" she chanted solemnly; "it's what we *show!*"

"But you needn't—"

"All the world loves a lover, darling, and see—here is more homage. Fans, *mon Dieu,* of all things!"

IV

Behind the advancing figure of the *maître d'hôtel* appeared a small boy, a basket on either arm. The two baskets were piled full of little fans, nestling close, like fragile angel's wings furled demurely. The *maître d'hôtel* paused once more beside them, and waved the boy peremptorily to the table. Leah's radiant smile embraced them both.

The boy's eyes blinked, and he hesitated, an uncertain hand wavering between the two baskets, while he sent a supplicating look toward the *maître d'hôtel.*

That potentate was, oddly enough, in the throes of a horrible indecision. He was, by nature and profession, a perspicacious soul. Not often did he thus hesitate in this delicately selective act. Tradition had it that one of the baskets contained fans for the damsel of painted lips and meretricious flush. The other reserved its more discreet souvenirs for the wives and daughters of unchallenged respectability.

The *maître d'hôtel* hesitated. His eyes encountered Leah's bright gaze and drifted off.

True, the lovely *mademoiselle's* lips were carmined by nature's own cosmetic. True, also, that the flush of youth, and not rouge, flared from her smooth young cheeks; but could those flitting finger tips, those arch glances, those murmured endearments, that languorous pose, be indicative of stolid circumspection?

If the subjects of his query had been French, the answer would have been emphatically no; and the *maître d'hôtel* decided to give the young foreigners the benefit of his doubt.

Leah's smile still held, and her hand was extended expectantly. A puzzled wonder was in her husband's eyes. Behind this swift, subtle pantomime he sensed a vague purpose.

The boy had evidently received a silent command from his superior. His hand dipped deftly into one of the baskets. With a comical little genuflection, he dropped a fan into Leah's ready hand.

"*Merci, mon ami!*" she cried, and tossed a franc across the table. "Isn't he a cunning gamin, Paul? You see, even he—"

She had whipped open the fan. For an instant the folded angel's wing fluttered in her fingers, while her mischievous smile lost itself in a horrified stare. With a gasp she snapped it shut.

"Oh, my dear!" she breathed, color flooding her cheeks.

The bewilderment in Paul's face had given place to alarm.

"Leah, what is it?"

"The fan, Paul!"

"What's the matter with it?" he demanded hotly. "Let me see it!"

"Oh, I can't—not here!"

Hysterical mirth was shaking her now. She refused to meet his eyes. His fury grew along with her confusion.

"Leah, I insist!"

"But you mustn't, dearest! Don't you understand? You saw the two baskets—you *saw* him hesitate, and then give me—oh, my dear, they think—"

"Leah, they didn't give you—"

"One intended for — for lovers, dear? But they *did!* And I've *always* longed for one out of the other basket!"

Now it was Paul's turn to flush. Hot fury dyed his cheeks.

"This has gone far enough," he said thickly. "I'll—"

"Hush! The waiter!" She laid an admonishing hand on his arm.

Gently the *garçon* set the plate of small, round *profitrolles* before her.

"*Mademoiselle,*" he enunciated clearly.

Something in the word drew her eyes fleetingly to his face, before they dropped hastily to her plate. She drew in her breath sharply. A card, deftly slipped beneath the little saucer of *profitrolles,* showed a sly corner to her startled view.

She drew it out ever so little, her husband's furious gaze upon her. A name, picturesquely, authentically French, was engraved upon it—an address—a telephone number, underlined—and a message.

"Leah!" It was Paul's voice, shaking with repressed anger. "What does it say?"

"A message!" she whispered rapturously. "From an admirer, my dearest—think of it!"

"Who — what does it say?" he stammered.

"Oh, much! I *am* successful—"

"What does it say?" repeated Paul huskily.

"Don't hurry me, lovey!"

"If you don't want a scene here—"

"Ah, but I *do!*" She greeted the suggestion jubilantly. "A scene above all things—even a duel, perhaps! You might challenge him! A duel in the Luxembourg! What a thrill as a fillip to this adventure!"

"Leah, if you don't—"

"Well, then," she pouted, "if you *must* know, it says: '*Vos beaux yeux me rendent fou.*'"

"Don't tell me in French!" he ejaculated sharply.

"You really should learn French," she said reproachfully. "Think of it—a perfectly legitimate Ph. D., and—well, then, in English. This is literal, darling. The gentleman says that my beautiful eyes are driving him mad!" She rolled those luminous members in mock dismay. "Think of that, *mon amour,* that I should cost a useful citizen of Paris his sanity!"

All the atavistic instincts of a long line of Puritan ancestors were rampant in Paul Speare's breast.

"The damned impudent old reprobate! I'll—"

But his wife laid an admonishing hand over his clenched fist.

"Tut, tut, darling!" she reproached softly. "How do you know he's old? He may be young and handsome. You really must not be angry. Who," she asked sweetly, "was the author of this marvelous idea? Who said that of all cities in the world, Paris loves the lover best? And have we not proved it? Look around at all the envious glances fixed upon you, dearest! Think of the *fan,* and of this touching *billet doux!* Remember that if you look so cross, they will think that you no longer love me. It is what you *show*—"

The wrathful indignation on Paul's face had dissolved into a sheepish grin, but he bent over his wife and spoke with grim emphasis.

"All right—the joke's on me; but you get a hustle on, and eat those what-do-you-call-'ems, young woman. I'm going to get you out of here!"

"Think of the service, *mon trésor,*" murmured Leah absently and picked up her spoon.

Getting Leah out of Julien's, past a double line of bobbing servitors, and through a barrage of openly admiring glances, was not a trifling matter. Paul's nether lip was between his teeth as he hurried her across the sidewalk to the waiting cab that the doorman had summoned.

"Hôtel Chateaubriand," he ordered, and hustled her unceremoniously inside.

The attentive doorman did not close the door of the cab. Deftly he elevated himself to the step of the ancient cab; deftly leaned across the occupants; deftly lowered the betasseled shades within, and extended a hand, palm upward, to receive the shining golden coin that Paul deposited therein. Only then did he close the door, very gently, and with a wistful twinkle in his old, faded eyes, as they departed for that ecstatic Arcadia whose dimly remembered delights still stirred sluggishly within the crypt of his own memories.

Leah's face, as she turned to her husband in the faint light of the adroitly sealed vehicle, was stripped of its jubilation.

"Why, my dear, what—why did he pull down the shades?"

But her husband's voice was triumphant.

"That," he announced, "is service—for lovers!"

He took Leah jealously into his arms.

The Other Man's Business

AN INTERESTING PROBLEM IN THE ETHICS OF FRIENDSHIP AND MATRIMONY

By Elizabeth Irons Folsom

JOY was pressed out of the homecoming by Cliff's confidence and enthusiasm for a thing in which there lay no foundation for either confidence or enthusiasm. As the taxi slid away from the dock, he began to tell Curtis the whole story. Before it turned the first corner, his friend knew that Cliff was engaged to marry Janet Hill—engaged without knowing Janet Hill's history.

Curtis, as he listened, felt himself growing hard-faced, lowering again the mask which made him older than he should be, and which, he had hoped, would be permanently lifted by his return to New York. He came down the gangplank with one eye on Cliff, waving there in the crowd. He knew that the spring of youth was in his step and in his mind.

He had come home after ten years. He was done with work and struggle. He was to take his success and enjoy it, to have some laughs, some gay old times in Cliff's company and according to Cliff's ideas of a gay old time. Now Cliff was announcing that he was to marry Janet Hill, whose name was written on a very grimy tablet of Curtis's memory; and Cliff knew nothing of her past.

"You never knew her, Curtis. She said you never did."

"No—I never knew her."

"And that's funny, too. You knew a lot of the crowd she trailed with. She's a little older than I, but that doesn't make any difference."

"I think it does make a difference. A man should be older. A woman ages faster—"

Cliff's young laugh broke in.

"Old stuff! Women don't age at all nowadays; and Janet—she's youth in the flesh. Wait until you see her!" His voice softened—pathetic, pretty, this young love. "She's the daintiest thing — tiny, you know."

"No—I didn't know."

Whatever Cliff might be, he was not sensitive to tones, and did not seem to feel the ice in Curtis's voice. Perhaps he was too fond of the woman—fond was a prettier word than infatuation.

"Well, you'll see for yourself," Cliff was saying. "How would you like to go right on now, pick her up, and all have tea together and get acquainted?"

"Really, Cliff, I'm not as good a sailor as some. I'm a bit shot to pieces after a voyage. It takes me a day to get right with the world."

"Oh!" There was long disappointment in the voice. "You'd rather not? Oh, all right! You'd rather go to the hotel first? I—well, you see, I didn't think of that. I'm so tough myself—I'm never tired, or sick, or anything, you know. All right, Curt—later!"

He always called his old friend "Curt." There was no fatherly or old uncle or guardian business in their connection. They were quite on a par. There wasn't so much difference, after all, Curtis preened himself. Ten or twelve years between man and boy are much; between men they are nothing.

"Well!" Cliff always stood up his remarks on legs of "well's" and "oh's." "Well, I guess she's expecting me. I'll phone her."

"Had you told her we would come straight from the boat?"

"Well, I had. Didn't realize that you were not in love with her—yet. I'll phone her. It will be all right with her. She's always suited with everything, Janet is."

Yes, she had better be! A woman of her stripe had better take what she could get, and be agreeable about it. She had no right to anything else. Why hadn't some one told Cliff? There were plenty of people who remembered. They hadn't told. They didn't want to. No doubt they thought it none of their business. Was it any of Curtis's?

The question shaped itself as the taxi whirled around the third corner. Wretched question! He could not set it aside.

You see, Curtis knew Mrs. Woodbury. He had been attracted by her, ice-incrusted as she was. He saw her break—and when the ice-incrusted break, they go into fragments. He saw that.

How she had cried! She did not stop crying when she saw him. That was why he remembered so well, because she did not mind his knowing.

And then, too, he had not seen many women cry. Of course it was silly to cry like that over Woodbury—too fat, too red-faced, too loud of laugh; but Curtis could not select what Mrs. Woodbury should cry about. That was her business. He remembered the day when he made an unexpected call, and went in too silently. He remembered it, and he tied it up with harsh knots that excluded Janet Hill from any kindly feeling forever.

Janet was not the only one; but that didn't make any difference. She was the one named in Mrs. Woodbury's bill for divorce. It was a vile scandal, involving several actresses, a manicurist or two, a couple of dancers—Woodbury's associates at plentiful times; but the person actually named in the divorce bill was Janet Hill. That tied publicity to guilt, and no one would argue that guilt with publicity was not worse than guilt without publicity.

And now Cliff, the bulwark of Curtis's future, the link that held him to humanity, that brought him out of his shell, that made him submit to doing what other people did—Cliff was to marry the corespondent in the worst divorce proceeding of Curtis's memory.

During the rest of the drive and the settling ceremonies at the hotel, Cliff's talk remained static upon one subject—Janet and what she said and did; her beauty; her cleverness; her future as welded with his. He had a one-track mind. Curtis had not seen young love in its vigorous phase. He pulled his mask close and retreated behind monosyllables—and Cliff did not even know it.

The younger man stood over Curtis's brushes as they were put out, and talked. Janet was doing book reviews, because there wasn't much left from her father's estate, and she had turned the bulk of it over to her mother and sisters. They lived in a small way in a small town. Of course they did! She lived independently in the city. Of course she did!

She wrote reviews for a publishing house, and put into shape manuscripts that had good ideas shabbily dressed in words. So she got along, Cliff said, and she was so brave about it, so capable, so game, so—and so forth, and so forth, without regard for Curtis and his detached words.

Curtis remembered Janet Hill extremely well as the dazzling member of an impecunious family on the edge of society. He had not cared for edges. If he was to be interested in women at all, they must be secure in position, and in brains. Despite the book reviews, he doubted if Janet Hill of the divorce papers had brains. He remembered knowing that she danced madly well, did stunts in theatricals, and was just the kind of girl to get into some unpleasant affair.

And Cliff was to marry her. Curtis came back to that point constantly.

He was glad to get rid of Cliff's infatuated youth after dinner. He pleaded need for quiet, and slipped the bolt of his door savagely on Cliff's hurrying back. He went to the window, to see if he could see the young man go out of the hotel door. He would like to see him without the smudge of the woman, to get a glimpse of the Cliff he used to know—a Cliff that was his, not submerged in Janet Hill.

He could not pick out his friend in the crowd. Even that was denied him. He stared out at the thousands of lights, and knew that a perfectly good desert island was full of rare company as compared with the aloneness of a great city.

II

It was raining. Curtis stood at the window and looked down at the avenue greased by the rain, at the machines sliding over it, at the lights doubling themselves in it and refracting into fingers pointing broadly. A wet night on the avenue! He had often thought of it. Well, it wasn't much. It hadn't the charm he had given it.

He jerked the curtains aside for more of the sliding, greased pavement below, that he might better realize the fact that he was back in New York, where things happen, and where happenings must be met. He was not off on the hillsides of Italy. It was not Ravello close there. There were no twinkles of light down a deep valley, no sounds of soft voices, no song of lemon pickers, no close night that caressed, no winds so gentle that they made dreams truth. There was no three-room villa where a writing table was the chief occupant. There were no books that lured, no silences, no aloofness that touched like soothing fingers, no life to be led as a man saw fit.

Below, the traffic streamed by—an army of people going somewhere, each one with a definite object. He must now have definite objects. How could he have thought he would like it!

He had decided that ten years of dreaming were enough—ten perfect years that had brought him fame. He would be sought after, when it was known that he was in New York. The busy people hurrying past in all those motors liked what his solitude had allowed him to do.

He had had years of luscious, drifting work. He put them on paper, and now he had come back to enjoy the fame they brought him; and in the first few hours he had met disappointment and disgust. Already he was a lifetime away from the villa there, hanging to the mountainside. Well, thank God, he hadn't disposed of the place. He was not quite so foolish as that. He could go back; and, by thunder, it wouldn't be long before he did!

But what were his responsibilities toward Cliff? Devilish things, responsibilities. There were none back there on his Italian mountainside.

But he must do something about Cliff before he was free to get away. He would do it quickly. No need to dawdle! He doubted if he would unpack at all. He would get it over at once.

How would Cliff take it? Probably Cliff would rather have him in Italy, after this telling was over; and Cliff, too, had counted on their being together after ten years.

They had planned to enjoy each other's friendship as they had in the past. Cliff was an alluring youngster. Curtis turned from the window and walked back and forth, to think of Cliff as he first knew him. He was Cousin Molly's son—poor Cousin Molly, whose marriage was of the failures. Curtis sent Cliff to his preparatory school and engineered his vacations. When poor Molly gave up the struggle, he annexed the boy into his own establishment. Then, before it was a credit to take care of Cliff, the grandfather died and left the lad money enough to be independent.

Curtis got the inheritance into proper shape, put Cliff into college, and went away, conscience free. There had been one visit together, which was a lot of fun for both. Cliff had gone back to America, leaving Curtis among the lemon orchards. He had dreamed, worked, accomplished. Finally he had decided to come home and see Cliff in his young maturity; and, in the meantime, the lad had been gobbled up by a siren, a beguiler, a tainted woman. What was Curtis's duty in the matter, and how far would that duty be effective?

He went back to the window. Motors were still streaming past—a host of busy people, going to places, doing things, making decisions—

III

If his responsibilities had not awakened him early in the morning, Cliff, on the telephone, would have done so. There was apparently no solitude to be had. This was a land of telephone bells. He reached across the pillow for his.

Cliff explained, with eagerness that bubbled, that they—he and Janet—were to meet Curtis for luncheon.

"With good food is a good way to meet," Cliff declared.

Was there a reservation in his voice? Had he caught an impression from the older man, or had one been given him by this Janet?

Janet Hill was first at the meeting place. Yes, she would be! She was taking no chance. Cliff should be able to see that she was striving—doing her part and a little more.

She got up from a corner of the room and came forward.

She was, as Cliff said, a dainty thing. Her black gown was swathed about her slenderness. Her hat was bigger than she—drooping as to brim, a great dark frame for a face that was very much alight. There was her beauty—in the alightness of her. It was in her eyes, in her mouth, in the poise of her chin, in the way she held her head, even in her ungloved hand coming forward.

It was dim at the table, but, inside the blackness of her hat, Janet Hill glowed. There was a white pedestal of throat. Curtis watched her and said little.

She was quite self-possessed.

"I should have known you many years ago," she said. Daring!

"So many of your friends were mine." Brazen!

"You will find changes among them." Experimenting!

"We have grown old, you know." Spiteful!

"But we have settled into our places." Defiant!

It was not unlike pulling a heavy weight uphill, that luncheon. Curtis fancied that even Cliff was not oblivious to the slow motion of the conversational wheels. Janet Hill, however, was not disturbed — not even by any recollection of the disrupted Woodbury household, although the presence of Curtis must have sent her thoughts back.

She did most of the talking. Curtis saw Cliff admiring her; saw that he mistook her facility with words for breadth, depth, and understanding. She could pick up a subject, whip it about with phrases, give it light and shade, catch an idea from another brain, embellish it, make it seem a poor thing as originated, but worth while when she had finished with it.

She had the very bad habit—so Curtis thought it—of finishing other people's sentences for them. If he paused, that his final thought might be complete, she would snap in the word or the idea at which he had been arriving. It showed agility of mind, but it was ill bred, he considered. If a man may not own his sentences, what may he own?

Curtis wondered if she wrote her book reviews in that way—purloining ideas from others to dress them freshly. He would have expected that of her. No surprise about Janet Hill thus far!

Cliff's voice roused him.

"Well, I'll say this is the best food in New York, and you don't appreciate it. You are not eating. I won't bring you here again. It 'll be a *rôtisserie* next time we three lunch together. You are not eating either, Janet!"

Curtis murmured something about a late breakfast. Janet was beginning to put on her gloves. With their long blackness, they shut off her bare round arms.

"Well, what are we all going to do now?" asked Cliff. "I must go to the office for a while. Do you want to drive, Janet—you and old Curt?"

"Perhaps Mr. Curtis will come home with me and have a visit," said Janet Hill.

A nice, neat-fitting cover was over the weapon with which she was to fight. Curtis saw that she knew there was something to face, and that she wanted to get it over; and she saw that he knew. She must wonder what he would do about it. She wanted to know, and she wanted to know now.

He came back promptly.

"Your house, by all means."

To him it sounded sinister, but to the unconscious Cliff it brought solace for the silence and reserve.

"Oh, fine! And then we will all dine together and go some place afterward."

"We may all be pulling hair by that time," she said, smiling. "Let's make no cut and dried plans, Cliff. Mr. Curtis may be tired of us both by that time."

Oh, it was fight! "Us"—Janet and Cliff! He, the returned friend, was clearly the outsider.

His eyes met hers. Hers told nothing. He could not be sure what his told.

Cliff left them at the apartment house

where she lived. The wide entrance was flanked by dusty-looking palms. The imitation onyx wainscoting had a darkened rim at the floor, where the mops had struck. The three tapestry-seated chairs sagged slightly. The door boy needed brushing. In the elevator lurked the odor of ancient fried things and a basement flavor that was a little acrid.

Janet Hill lived on the top floor. At first sight, her furniture seemed trying to get out of the door, it was so thick and near. The other room was better, because there was a window, from which was distance. The Hudson lay like a dark gray band, which a few lights were already beginning to spot. There was a chair on each side of the window, and near it stood a very large roll-top desk. It was such a desk as a bank president or a railroad magnate might want.

Janet Hill wrote tinkling book reviews at that vast desk. Curtis suppressed a smile, and took the chair she indicated, bumping a leg on the bank president's desk as he squeezed around it.

She left him, and he looked about. Evidently she slept on the couch there. It was trying to be a divan, with its dingy oriental cover and stacked pillows. Everything looked mussy. How in the world did Cliff—clear, fastidious, fresh, and gay—get hold of this dusty woman, older than himself, with her makeshifts, her barefaced, smudgy pretenses?

Poor youngster! Curtis would get him out of this. He would bare the sawdust filling. He would give the lad a chance for his life. The tawdry, the effort-making cheapness that crowded the place! He would attend to this personally.

Then he was not so sure of attending to anything personally, for Janet Hill had come back into the room. She had taken off her hat. Her hair was not dark; it was a clear yellow blond, and it was done up in some close, swathing way that left the nape of her neck free. The straightest of lines ran from that nape of neck down her shoulders and back.

Blond hair in that great black hat—it surprised Curtis. Her eyes were dark with an odd, red-brown darkness, and they had flecks in them of the light that was all about her. Yes, he could see how she took Cliff's young fancy. She did not look her age. She must be thirty-five. She certainly did not look it.

She leaned forward suddenly and smiled—not pleasantly.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" she said.

IV

The challenge was so direct and defying that Curtis met it squarely, without any of the tempering that he would have given another woman.

"I have not decided yet what I shall do."

"But something?"

"Certainly something. You know that, of course."

"Yes — I thought you would make it your business."

"The boy has been mine for years. It is my duty to look after him."

"How are you going to do it?"

"I am going to tell him all I know about you."

"Such as—what?"

"About some parts of your history which I think he does not know."

"Such as—what?"

"Such as—the episode with Woodbury, for instance."

"You will tell him that?"

"I will. When a man marries, he should have a chance to decide whether he wants a woman who has been corespondent in a divorce case."

She did not answer. She might be looking her age, if it were not for her light.

"I don't want to be brutal, Miss Hill, but it is fair that Cliff should know the reputation of the woman he wants to marry."

"He has had every chance to find it out."

"How do you mean?"

"I have not tried to keep anything from him."

"Not about Woodbury?"

"Why should I talk to him about Mr. Woodbury?"

"To let him decide whether he wants that kind of woman."

"It's over. It's past. Why should I talk about it now? No one else does."

"Some one may after you are married. That would not be pleasant."

She was silent. She would nail him to the cross, poor boy, if she could. She would let him be told after she had him—or his alimony money!

Curtis leaned forward. She shrank away and turned her back to him, standing close to the window and staring out over the river.

"You see, Miss Hill, I came back here to find that Cliff had selected a woman whose name is smirched as no other name in that group of people was smirched during the years I knew them. I know the story. I know just where it placed you. Cliff came on later, when that scandal had been covered by others; but some day some one will remember it. As you are living now"—he glanced at the bank president's desk and its scant sheaf of papers—"it doesn't make so much difference; but when you are his wife, it will make all the difference in the world. You see it, of course. I can't allow it! I must protect him!"

"He will marry me just the same if he knows."

"I doubt it. He's proud. He's had reason to be. No man wants a wife—I beg your pardon. I don't want to be rough about it, but he must know."

She whirled upon Curtis.

"Then tell him!"

"I thought I would be generous, and let you do it."

"I won't!"

"You would marry him, and he not know?"

"Yes—why not? I am entitled to some happiness."

"Then I will tell him; but I offer you a chance to hold his respect."

"I don't want the chance. I tell you I won't do it!"

"Suit yourself. I have warned you. I shall tell him the story, and let him choose."

She laughed.

"You feel safe to do that?"

"Perfectly. I know his history, his pedigree. He's fastidious." Curtis's glance again swept the room and its holdings. "I'll leave it to Cliff after he knows the truth."

She was silent for so long that Curtis took out his watch and looked at it.

"You had better tell him yourself," he said at length. "You have no chance of keeping his respect the other way—if you care for that."

She looked at him. He wondered how he could have thought her so full of light. Her brightness had been merely temporary, then. She looked very tired when the sparkle was not on.

"I suppose it never occurred to you that I might be innocent," she said.

"Innocent in your acquaintance with Woodbury? No, it never occurred to me that you were."

"I was."

"If I remember—and I have been trying to recall events during the last few hours—if I am not mistaken, you were with him at a Duxbury road house."

Silence.

"And at rooms uptown that he had furnished for his—friends."

Silence.

"There were other places set forth in the bill, and made public in the newspapers. Those I have mentioned are enough."

"I am innocent."

Curtis did not answer. She sat down and bent toward him. A street lamp popped out, and the light lay over her head and throat.

"I wonder if you could understand me! A woman, though she might refuse to admit it, would know how close she sometimes likes to go to danger; how she tempts, and goes just not quite too far."

He waited for her to go on.

"There are women to whom admiration is wine, and more than wine—a necessity. Women like that love without emotion. Do you understand me? I am trying to tell you about women who love to play with their power over men, and who dare much because they have not the urge that would wreck them. They are not good women—not kindly, nor true—but they do not sin, as you call it. Perhaps they are not as good as the women who dare to sin. The women I am talking about are those who are unmoved, and who play with the forces of men just because they are safe. They are bad women, in a way, but they are not bad in the way that gets divorces for other women."

Curtis shook his head.

"I was afraid you wouldn't understand. Let me say it again—slowly. Let me make it personal. Let me say it of myself. I was not well brought up, Mr. Curtis. I knew my power over men when very young, because I was told of it. An older woman told me—oh, they do so much harm, these older women who talk! I was taught to attract, but the love of a man was only interesting to me. It did not carry me away. I always wondered how far he would go. I was safe. I did not care.

There was no urge in me that made it dangerous. They are mighty bad things, such women. Those who let go, and love, and pay the penalty—I think they are better. I do think so. I always calculated how much gayety and devotion I could have and give nothing. I could not imagine caring enough for a man to take me too far. Well, more than once I went to the safety line; but if you are looking in me for the thing that brings divorces, I am inside that line. I played the game with Rex Woodbury, as I played it with other men. I thought—I don't think so now, but I thought so then—that I remained a good woman if I just led and led, and never followed—if I slipped away from danger just in time."

He was watching her. It was an odd confession.

"I don't say that I am a good woman. A good woman does not play those games; but I do say that I was innocent of the charge in the Woodbury case. Of that I have never been guilty. Not good—oh, not good! There are other virtues than chastity, you know, Mr. Curtis."

"You say that you had no guilt in the Woodbury case?"

"None—absolutely none."

"Then why didn't you say so?"

"They would not have believed me. Are you believing me?"

"It doesn't matter whether I believe you or not. Tell it to Cliff, and see what he says."

"Tell that to Cliff? No!"

"Why not, if it is true?"

"I do not want him to know that I was that kind of woman. I say that I *was*. What I did then seems to me now to be nearly the same as being guilty. He might think so, too. I can almost hope that he would. I can almost hope that you do."

After a moment Curtis said:

"I don't see that this changes the situation as to Cliff. Some time, some one will talk. Tell him what you have told me."

"I won't! I don't want him to know."

"He must be told something. Try that story on him."

At his short, skeptical laugh, the color came back in a sweeping flood over her paleness.

"You don't believe me. I thought you might. You are the only man I ever saw of whom I thought that he might understand. And you don't!"

"Perhaps Cliff will believe. Will you tell him—or shall I?"

"Neither of us!" She was aflame now. Her eyes were dark, her throat contracted. Her hands twisted a post in a flimsy chair back, and it snapped off. She flung it across the room.

"Tell? Never! A man in my place wouldn't tell. A man would face the evil one first. Guilty or not, he would not tell. Because I happen to be a woman, why should I? I won't! I'll stand by myself. I know what I am, and I know that by the laws of men—and that is what we live by, isn't it?—I am not guilty. I have a right to happiness. I haven't had so very much. I'll take it now, if I can get it. And you will tell? You meddler! Will you go to Cliff and tell him? Well, go! I'll hold him just the same, if I can. I want happiness. I'm not guilty—only of treachery, of selfishness, of being a sneak, and we are not talking about those things. I have shown you the inside of me, and you won't believe. You think I am a bad woman. I have tried to show you that I am a good woman who was bad in her way. I needn't have told you all that; but I did, and you won't believe. Well, I'll hold him if I can. Go and tell him, and then see who is stronger! You? I'm stronger! You shall see!"

V

Curtis went out of the house, a confusion of emotions within him. She had been so fierce, and so frail! She was depending so wholly upon her own strength, and there seemed so little of it! She had rested her hands hard on the chair back, as a man might; but he had seen her elbows tremble. Her voice did not ring as her words rang. He would have said that it was a damp voice—one where tears were near—tears thick and wet; but she had faced him down. She had made him angry, and more determined than ever.

As he walked down town, he wondered what he would do if she had been more humanly feminine, if she had appealed. He might have agreed with her that it was none of his business. It was a wretched thing to tell tales. No, he decided, with swift revulsion—it was not wretched when Cliff was involved, when an older woman with a shady past had netted him.

To be really fair, he did not see why every thought and act of a woman's life should be recalled and given to the man she was to marry. A man who did that—his place was in a museum. Then why should a woman?

Did sex make the difference? Was it worse for a man to marry a woman with a doubtful past than for a woman to marry a man with one? Yes, certainly it was worse. The reasons are too familiar to need rehearsing.

Walking on, he thought it over and over, but he could not decide what to do. Back at the hotel, he stared down at the avenue and hated it. He had not had as much perplexity in ten years as New York had given him in twenty-four hours. What did he want there, anyhow?

He looked at his unpacked luggage, and thought of moving on. There would be no pleasure for him after he had told Cliff. Later, the boy would be grateful, but he could not expect him to be grateful instantly. He would be disbelieving, indignant, angry.

Moreover, there might be conflict with her. He could not know which side of her would dominate in a contest—the side that wrenched off the chair post and flung it away, or the side revealed by the trembling elbows.

He knew Cliff's knock on the door. Well, he would go to it and get it over.

Cliff joined him at the window and got started first.

"Settled, are you?" he asked gayly.

"No—I didn't sleep much last night. It's noisy here."

Cliff laughed.

"But it's the heart of everything. You'll get used to it. Look down here at the most rococo street in the world. Doesn't it thrill you?"

"H-m! It's all right, but I've had so much quiet—"

"Oh, yes—it 'll take you a few days to get used to it. What do you want to do to-night?"

It was not easy to get started.

"I don't know."

"Sort of seedy, are you?"

"Maybe a bit."

"Well, where would you like to go for dinner—all of us?"

Curtis looked at the unpacked luggage.

"Do you know, I believe I'll take a run over to Boston for a few days."

Cliff stared.

"What for?"

A cowardly idea had come to Curtis. If he ran away to Boston, he could consider his problem without interruption. If he chose, he could sail for Italy from there. It would be easy to find some excuse for sneaking away.

"Because—"

He stopped before the sharp change in the young face. It had flushed, its jaw had squared, its mouth was not so young.

"You don't like Janet! I saw it at noon. You don't like her!"

He had always known of Cliff's quick temper. Cousin Molly's husband had been noted for the same thing. It was all over the boy just then—in his shoulders, in the set of his head.

"You don't like Janet! Why not?"

They would have a fine time, Mr. and Mrs. Cliff—the flint of her and the flame of him!

"You don't like her, and I don't care a damn why you don't! You can't dictate to me, you understand!"

"I understand."

"You showed it at noon. I don't care how you feel. That's your business, not mine. I shall keep out of it, and I'll say right here that I shall expect you to keep out of mine!"

The boy! A boy blazing with boyish anger! In a few moments the whole comradeship was racked. Two women could not have done worse.

It did not anger Curtis. He was not even angry at Janet Hill, the cause.

"I have some right to you, Cliff," he said calmly; "and you have some right to me, too."

"Not about her! I'm for her—do you see?"

For her! It was a stab to Curtis. The long years were nothing as against that whiffet of a woman! It hurt.

"She's hard as nails, Cliff," he said, as a beginning.

"Hard! She's gentle and tender—like no one else! You can't speak of her like that to me!"

And he said other words that Curtis tried not to hear—rhapsodies about the woman, slurs upon the slinking man who would attack her. It was all storm and heat and youth. Cliff would be very sorry when he had cooled off, but it was useless to try and help in the cooling process.

Then the door slammed, and he was gone. Curtis had not told; but anything he might have said would have been washed over by the flood of words from Cousin Molly's husband's son.

VI

Curtis went to Boston that night. It was noisy there, too, and he felt lonely. Italy pulled. He took passage on a boat for Naples.

He wrote a short letter to Cliff:

Dear Cliff:

We are both edgewise just now. I am going back before I am any more so. The tiff between us will be forgotten, if we do not meet for a while. I am always at your command, and I feel sure that you are always at mine. The villa is the best place for me. When you write, I shall be very glad.

He thought of adding something about their long affection and the newness of a certain other affection; but he did not. He let it go at that.

He watched the hustling country drop back, and he remembered again that he had not told.

Cliff wrote very soon. On the top step of the stairs that wound down into the valley toward Amalfi, Curtis read the letter. It was gentle and friendly. The hot flame was out. It was a little self-conscious, and it did not mention Janet Hill.

"If I had married and had a son, and he had come back to me, I should feel like this," he told the valley. "Happy, but with an ache inside me—a longing, a lonesomeness that stings."

The letters came often after that, and they never spoke of Janet Hill. Curtis was tempted to break the reticence that seemed to bar a normal footing between them; but he had been taught a certain maxim about sleeping dogs, and he let the subject alone.

All that winter the letters came, with not a reference to Janet. They came through the next summer and the next winter. But for that silence, Curtis would have said that they were quite the old kind—boyish, eager, joking. He supposed that they had not yet married. Cliff would hardly fail to mention that.

Curtis did not work much. He had a strange disinclination for effort. He smoked during the day and watched his valley; smoked at night and saw the lights come out among the trees. Far below, the bell on the church struck—long, mellow, alluring strokes. Life was good.

Sometimes through the delicious days and nights there would strike a memory of the bank president's desk, and of the frail, slender woman who had defied him. She was probably happier now—not holding herself taut by strength of mind and limb. Curtis hoped so. What did it matter what she had once appeared to be? He wished happiness and peace. He was glad that he had minded his own business. Most likely it would be as good a marriage as most. How many people, after all, had clean slates to present at the matrimonial altar?

He thought of her often—sometimes the first thing in the morning, sometimes in his last waking moment. It was strange. If she held him in that way, of course Cliff would stand up for her.

The second summer he went up to Como, early, before the tourist crowd swarmed. He paced daily the broad stone walk between Cadenabbia and Menaggio. He sat on the curb, as clearly and fully a loafer as he had been a worker.

His letters were forwarded there. Among them were a couple from Cliff, and after each one he peopled his walks with Janet Hill, the unmentioned. He wondered if the lovely lakeside would not glow the more if her light were there. Or had her light gone out? No! But he would like to know.

He dallied on his way back to Ravello. His mail was not to be sent on to him; but after Naples had held him a while, there came a forwarded cable message.

He stared at it long, after he had read it. Cliff was on his wedding journey. "We," he said, would be in Naples on such a day, at such a hotel. "We!" He said, too, that his last letter had explained.

No doubt the letter was waiting for Curtis at Ravello. He realized that his dawdling journey had eaten up time. "We" must already have been for several days at a hotel close to where he was staying.

He heard Cliff's laugh as he entered the little garden in front of the hotel. Then he saw him. Forgotten were differences. Cliff rushed forward, radiant, glowing, husky—how husky and how young he was!

The girl on the bench rose. She was a tall, slight girl, with her hat in her hand, with a shimmering mass of dark hair released—a pretty girl, and a stranger to Curtis.

Cliff was introducing his wife—only

slightly embarrassed, but glancing quickly at Curtis.

"You had my letter?"

"Not yet," answered Curtis, and explained that he had been wandering.

He was singularly elated. It seemed to him that he was very talkative.

"Carolyn is a daughter of Hubert Lane. You knew him, Curtis."

"Yes—I knew your father very well, my dear," he said.

The Lanes were well-known people. Where was the little fierce thing who had defied him? He didn't ask. Cliff did not speak of her.

They had a gay time together, with drives and sight-seeing. They went to Ravello with Curtis, and then he went back to Naples with them.

At his villa he read the waiting letter. It did not tell much. Cliff wrote that he had made a mistake, but hadn't realized it, because it had made no difference until he knew Carolyn Lane. Then there was a great difference. Carolyn was coming across with him soon—in fact, to-morrow—a morning wedding—boat at noon—England first, then to see old Curt.

That was all. Janet Hill was outside of that history.

"Come on up to Switzerland with us," Cliff urged.

"With a bride and groom? Never! Besides, I have to make a little business trip. Later I'll join you."

VII

Curtis took a boat at Naples for that business trip. As he went, he told himself that his publishers really wanted to see him, and that curiosity—a curiosity stronger than common sense—was not his only motive. He had wondered, alone and in crowds, with a sort of perpetual wonder, how it had come about. Sometimes he had hoped that Cliff would talk about it. Sometimes he had hoped that Cliff would not tell. The subject had never been mentioned, and Curtis, weaver of romance and song, must know.

When he reached New York, the heat of mid August lay over the city. It steamed up from the pavements, it burned down from the skies, it smothered across from the buildings. His room at the hotel was full of the air of a blast furnace.

But it was not until he stepped into the top floor of the apartment house where Janet Hill used to live that he realized heat. The elevator seemed to drop behind him from sheer collapse. The solid bank of heat which was the hall hardly allowed him to squeeze through.

He had found that she was still in the building. He was at her door.

She opened it. Her clear yellow hair was done in a close swathe. Her thin white dress had a half low neck. Her little head was high, her chin lifted. She looked at him, unsmiling.

"May I come in? I want to talk to you."

Silently she moved aside, and Curtis went through the crowded furniture to the one window in the other room, past the remembered desk. She sat down in front of the desk, in a rickety swivel chair. She sat erect, reached for a pair of shell-rimmed eyeglasses and adjusted them slowly. Then she looked at him through them.

Her face was to the light, and she made no effort to hide that she was pallid. She turned into the light what was left of her—and there was not much left.

A damp sweep of sticky wind came through the window, almost bringing the smell of asphalt. Motor horns tooted below, and in the distance clouds of smoke rose from the river.

"It's tremendously hot," he said.

Still she did not speak. He had not come to talk of the weather. The shell glasses told him that the eyes behind them might have narrowed a little.

"The last time I was here," he began firmly, "we did not have a pleasant talk. Do you remember?"

"Why are you here now?"

She was still doing book reviews. Something that might be one lay under her fingers. She shifted it, conveying the impression that she had been interrupted.

"I have just seen Cliff. He told me nothing. The situation has so aroused my curiosity—it's so very strange—that I—I crossed the ocean to find out the truth."

"Of what?"

"Of why he is there and you here. What happened?"

"Is that any of your business? It seems to me that it is his and mine."

"No, it is none of my business; but I am asking, just the same."

"You would almost read other people's letters, their business interests you so much!"

The line was straight down the back of her neck. A sun ray came through into her face and glittered on the eyeglasses, so that Curtis could not see behind them.

"We had a discussion about who should tell Cliff certain things. Who told?" he persisted.

"You did."

"I? That is just what I thought—you have been accusing me of having told him."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Of having let him know in some way."

"That's not true. I have never spoken of you to him since that day, and I told him nothing then."

She did not answer.

"I'm not lying to you. I am telling you the truth."

She rubbed the palms of her hands back and forth on the arms of the swivel chair. They left wet smudges.

"I am glad of that, although it doesn't matter now," she said.

He leaned forward.

"Who told him?"

She laughed then. It broke in her throat, but she caught it and made it go on—a real laugh.

"I told him."

"You told him? I thought you did. That was why I came—to hear you say that!"

She shook her head.

"I am not a heroine. I told him because I thought you had told him; and I wasn't really sure until to-day that you hadn't done it. He was so young—they change their minds. I suspect it was just that—just youth."

His head was in a whirl. She sat firm and erect. He rose.

"Then that is all. I had to know what you were—whether you would stick to silence, as you said you would. You thought I had told, and I thought you had *not* told. Thank you, Miss Hill. Are you still writing book reviews?"

"Yes."

"Still writing," he said, looking down at her. "Did you care very much when Cliff did not care?"

"No, not very much. I was very busy, you see."

He stepped toward her.

"Janet Hill, you are a humbug. You want to be hard and cold and bitter, but it is all pretense. You are quivering now. Janet, I came back to find out about Cliff, but I don't care about that. It's his business, not mine. My business is to love you, if you will let me. I'd like to marry you, and take care of you, and let you be yourself. I know you perfectly—not because of what you have done or said, but just because I know. Janet, will you marry me?"

"Oh, you hardly know me!"

"I have lived with you every day since I saw you last."

She swung slowly about toward the desk, took off her shell-rimmed glasses, gropingly found a safe place for them, and glanced at Curtis. Then she put her head down on her book review.

As unreservedly as she had once stormed at him, she sobbed.

He picked her up—so very little to pick up!—and put his cheek to hers.

MY FLOWERS

All of the whole round year,
  Even amid the snows,
Mine are the sweet heartsease,
  The lily, and the rose.

The fairest blooms of earth
  Along my path are spread;
With flowerlike thoughts of you
  Do I go garlanded.

For you are close akin
  To every flower that blows;
You are my sweet heartsease,
  My lily, and my rose!

Sennett Stephens

The House of the Wicked

A STORY OF ADVENTURE AND INTRIGUE IN THE FAR EAST

By Eleanor Gates and Frederick Moore

FRANCIS WEATHERBEE, an adventurous young American wandering through the Far East, ships as second mate on the schooner Lillebonne, from Manila to Java. The captain of the schooner, Blodgett, proves to be a sodden drunkard, and the first mate, Noakes, such a brutal tyrant that on a misty night, off the coast of Borneo, Weatherbee slips away in a small boat. Rowing shoreward, he finds himself in the mouth of a river, and in the mangrove jungle that fringes the water he stumbles upon a good-sized steamer. At first the vessel seems to be derelict, but on climbing aboard Weatherbee discovers a surprising state of things.

The vessel is the Tai-Lan, owned by Thaddeus Stone, a great figure in the trade of the East. Stone, an elderly millionaire, has suspected his wife, a beautiful girl, of an intrigue with a younger man named Houghton. To punish these two, he has trapped them on the Tai-Lan—which has been reported lost in a typhoon—and is holding them as prisoners in this remote hiding place, with a white man named Markin and three native servants as their jailers. An infernal machine has been placed in the bottom of the steamer, with a clockwork contrivance which Markin has to regulate periodically to keep it from destroying the vessel.

Markin frankly reveals the situation to Weatherbee, and tells him that as he now knows Stone's secret he cannot be permitted to leave the Tai-Lan.

VI

WEATHERBEE realized that what he had just been told was a fact. Having escaped from the Lillebonne, he was now a prisoner on the Tai-Lan, and for an indefinite period. He made no comment upon his situation, but quietly smoked on, turning this new development over in his mind, and considering just what his future attitude should be.

" You see how it is," the elder man continued, his tone mollifying. " As I said a bit ago, Mr. Stone's one danger is in bein' found out. That's why there's a gunman on the end of the bamboo bridge, and a powder mine under the decks. The boss just can't take no chances. If he was to, *blooey!*"

Weatherbee answered with an assumption of carelessness.

" Sure, I see how it is," he declared. " When you were telling me the story so freely, I guessed that I wouldn't be allowed to repeat it."

" Glad you take the thing philosophical, because here you are. If I give you the best we got, and you take it in the best temper you can, why, we'll all come out fine in the end. Ain't that so? When you showed up yonder at the edge of the swamp, I rung the gong and called you in. Had to do it, because I wasn't sure but what you'd already spotted us. If you had, I couldn't let you go away and tell what you'd saw, and come back with a few friends—and a coast guard gunboat!"

" Naturally you couldn't."

" Especially as it would have been straight against my orders."

" But suppose I hadn't been alone, Mr. Markin?"

Markin shook his head.

" Don't like to think what might have happened," he answered. " Either it would been a case of finish everybody up, or else invite 'em aboard, and let the insurance machine attend to it."

Again, for a time, there was silence. Weatherbee smoked and pondered; Markin smoked and gently swung in his hammock. The afternoon was drawing to a close, so that the rays of the lowering sun were thrown aslant through the tops of the towering mangroves to the west, and through the many little openings in the interlaced creepers overhead, where there was a whisper of stirring air.

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Presently Dukun, the Malay, once more appeared. In his arms was a large, loose bundle of white mosquito netting. Swiftly, and without inconvenience to the two white men, the servant arranged the netting; and soon the well deck was both walled and roofed with the misty material. Then the table was spread for the evening meal.

Before the meal was eaten, Dukun went past Weatherbee, carrying a rude tray. Having let himself out of the netting room, he mounted to the quarter-deck, and disappeared over the stern. The visitor understood that the Malay was carrying supper to the unseen guard at the end of the bamboo bridge.

"How does it all look to you?" inquired Markin, with polite concern.

"As comfortable and luxurious as a smart liner."

"Ah, that's the stuff! It might be heaps worse! What I say to the two that's for'ard is what I say to you—try to look at the stay here as if it was a sort of a vacation. The climate ain't the best, but where else in five hundred miles would you get such good grub, and plenty of it, all the drink and tobacco you want, a nice room, readin' matter, music, games, and I don't know what all? Hey? There's a lot of stunts we can pull off to pass the time. When we're tired of playin', we can loaf. By the way, what did you fetch along? Maybe you got something interestin' in your pack?"

That brought a smile to Weatherbee's sober face. He pulled the bundle to his feet, untied the corners of the blanket, and spread his belongings out.

"Here you are!" he said. "A change or two, an extra pair of trousers, my best shoes, a compass, four tins of ship's biscuits, tobacco, and drinking water."

Markin had sat up to look at the display. Now he shook his head.

"My land!" he breathed. "Is *that* all you got, to tackle a Borneo jungle with?"

"Not much on wardrobe, am I?"

Markin gave a twist to his features and scratched his head.

"You won't mind me sayin', will you," he inquired, "that you'll have to look a lot neater?"

Weatherbee laughed outright.

"It's not dog enough for these decks, eh?" he returned. "I suppose I'm really not presentable for the eyes of a lady."

"It ain't the lady," Markin hastened to explain. "No—when you got native servants around, a white man's got to think how he looks. Get what I mean, don't you? With Malays and Chinks, there's a certain front you just must keep up. It ain't that way in the States, but this is Borneo; and if a white man looks like a beach comber down here, why, he'll get beach comber treatment."

Weatherbee's grin broadened.

"You're right, mine host," he declared. "I must be rated a gentleman, and look like one."

Markin blinked at the younger man gravely.

"Glad you called me your host," he said earnestly. "Was afraid you'd look at me like I was your jailer."

"Just the same, I'm a prisoner."

"Only nominal—only nominal. Don't look at it like that. Remember how blamed welcome you are. There's only one thing about the whole business that maybe you won't like—of nights, I'll have to lock you up, same as I do all the others. We can't take any chance that anybody loose aboard might start to show lights to the river, or make other signals."

"I shan't worry if you don't forget to attend to your insurance machine, as you call it."

"Don't you worry! That clockwork is as bad for me as it is for you; and I'll see to it like it was one of my eyes."

"And by day?" questioned Weatherbee. "Shall I be restricted to certain parts of the ship? Not that I want to nose around any, only I'd like to know just what's expected of me, so that I won't make any mistakes."

"Aw, go where you like! But here's another thing—it won't be safe for you to carry a gun. That would make Dukun and the Chink awful suspicious, and they'd be on my trail right off."

Understanding that any sign of disobedience might result seriously, Weatherbee promptly rose, crossed to the hammock, and halted beside Markin.

"It's in this outer pocket," he directed, assuming a readiness to be disarmed that he did not feel. "I've only one, but maybe you'd like to look through my pockets."

"No, no, no!" expostulated Markin. "I know a gent when I see one, Mr. Weatherbee. I take your word. Say, you and me are goin' to get on together like a couple of relatives! That's a fact. You been open and honest to me, I been open and honest to you. Let's keep it up, eh?"

He straightened to take the pistol. Holding it in his left hand, he extended the other cordially.

"I'm sorry as the dickens to take away your gun," he asserted, as they shook hands for the second time; "but Houghton or that girl might try to get hold of it, and do theirselves harm, or shoot somebody else. Or maybe they'd get you to play double by workin' on your feelin's—"

"I never interfere in what doesn't concern me," Weatherbee interrupted quickly, for he saw that here was a very real danger, not only to himself, but to the two who were locked up somewhere forward. "While I'm in the Tai-Lan, Mr. Markin, I shall have enough to do to look after myself. I'll make nobody's quarrel my own."

"It's nice to hear you say that," vowed the elder man. "Most young fellers are apt to be tempted to mix in, where a good-lookin' lady is concerned."

"It's a job I'm not hunting," was the short reply.

Markin laid a hand on Weatherbee's arm.

"I like you," he declared. "You talk like a reg'lar feller."

"Guess I'd better try to look like one," Weatherbee laughed. "So, if you'll give me the address of the nearest tailor, I'll go and fix myself up. Maybe you keep a tailor aboard?"

"No, I ain't got a tailor aboard," the other answered; "but, pshaw, there's plenty of first-class duds around. Houghton's about your size, and he's got trunks plumb full of 'em."

Night came suddenly. Dukun, having returned from his shore errand, lighted above the dinner table a lamp that had a hood on the side which was toward the river. Then he served such a meal as Weatherbee had not eaten in months—while against the sagging and gently wavering walls of white net whole legions of moths, and other insects of the jungle, came flitting with an unceasing rustle of their tiny wings. Accompanying the sound of those myriad flyers went the high-keyed chorus of swarms of mosquitoes.

With the food there was good wine. Afterward, a fine brand of cigars was proffered. The two lounged once more, and sipped a brandy and soda.

The moon had not yet risen. Out of the dark, which had settled thickly, came a low, murmurous undertone that reminded Weatherbee of the invisible, crocodile-haunted river under the bows of the steamer. He heard also the flutter of bats and night-faring birds. Now and again, from the blackness which hung over the near-by shore, other noises broke in—the swish of bushes, the call of an animal, and, as before, thrashings that told of great bodies either entering or leaving some muddy pool.

Markin was the first to break the after-dinner silence.

"Our friends for'ard," he began, "is just about to have their chow, because, you see, they take it later 'n us. That makes the evenin' go faster, they tells me. Also, bein' more stylish than yours truly, they ain't got much appetite till after seven thirty. Before they sit down to their soup and nuts, wouldn't you like to go along and meet 'em?"

Weatherbee stirred.

"That's just as you say, Mr. Markin. Of course, I'll be interested to see them. Maybe I'm even a good bit curious. On the other hand, I don't want to annoy them."

"Oh, ho, ho, ho!" The laugh was hearty. "*Annoy* 'em? My land! They're a darned sight more likely to pass out with joy! You'll look pretty near as good to 'em as the Dutch police. Sure y' will! In fact, they'll be so all-fired happy that if the boss ever hears about it he'll probably not like it, and pretty near snap my head off; but I got to take you down, for the simple reason that I ain't got no other safe place to put you."

Weatherbee rose.

"Look here, Mr. Markin," he said bluntly; "when I'm talking with these people, shall I have to watch every word I say?"

Markin was beside him now, and patted his shoulder reassuringly.

"Say whatever comes into your mind," he replied. "I've been flat-footed. My cards is all on the table. There ain't a thing them two can tell you that I ain't already handed out; so you don't have to watch your words—not by a long shot. They'll be tickled to death to have a good, long chin-chin with you and tell you all their troubles. These last eight months, they ain't had a peep at anybody but me and Dukun and Kum Lee. They'll be so excited over a stranger that neither of 'em will know which way to turn. They won't get a wink of sleep to-night!"

The prisoners were not the only ones who would feel excitement, Weatherbee told himself, with a silent laugh. He was already tingling. He was to see Stone's alleged rival, and the beautiful woman whose voice he had already heard!

"Come along!" said Markin, as he went up the starboard ladder to the saloon deck.

There he unlocked a door and led the way through it. Weatherbee found himself in a small social hall of the kind built into steamers of the Tai-Lan type. The hall was dimly lighted, but, despite the gloom, Weatherbee saw that it was well cared for.

It was furnished with Hongkong grass chairs and lounges, cushioned handsomely in gayly flowered chintz. Small tables were placed about. In one corner, folded, and neatly piled, were some deck chairs, and a curtained recess held books.

On glancing about, the stranger failed to see any framed officers' certificates, or certificates of inspection. Evidently these had all been unscrewed from their places on the bulkheads.

Down from the social hall, and facing aft again, led a stairway. On the top step, as the two started to descend, were a mother cat and several large kittens, all comfortably ensconced on the stair carpet. These were obviously members of a family group to which belonged the black kitten of the chart house.

Markin paused to whisper a tactful admonition.

"Don't call the lady Mrs. Stone, Weatherbee. It would get under her skin."

"What shall I call her?"

"Use her maiden name, and 'miss' her."

The companionway led down into a dining saloon. This was unlighted; and as Weatherbee halted beside Markin on the bottom step, he could see nothing of the room except the beginning of a narrow corridor, running aft, which appeared to divide the room.

To judge by the beginning of it, what an extraordinary corridor it was! Secured to the deck, and to the angle irons of the ceiling, was heavy woven wire, which formed its two walls. The wire mesh led aft into darkness that was impenetrable.

The men stayed where they were. In the black of that divided prison place were two pairs of eyes watching them, as they stood faintly silhouetted against the dim light coming down the stairs? Weatherbee wondered, and listened, but could not catch the slightest movement.

"Hey!" shouted Markin into the dimness. "Kum Lee!"

A moment, and a door at the far end of the corridor was opened, showing a lighted passage. On the threshold of the dining saloon stood a white-bloused Chinese — a coolie who still clung to the old-style fashion of wearing a cue. From the top of his shaven head this hung down respectfully.

"Light the lamps," Markin commanded.

"Jus' now, boss."

Leaving Weatherbee at the foot of the companionway, Markin went forward, unlocked a door of iron bars in the left wall of wire mesh, and admitted the yellow man to the cage room on that side. The Chinese struck a match, and Weatherbee saw a table that was large enough to seat fourteen, at least. It was strewn with books, magazines, and papers. On it, too, was a lamp, which the oriental lighted.

As the glass chimney was set in place, the visitor noted that there were comfortable swivel chairs along one side of the table, and at either end. The tops of the chairs on the far side of the table were visible, and beyond them the doors of staterooms, interspersed with the narrow wells which let in light, under ordinary circumstances, from portholes between the cabins.

No occupant was in sight.

"In one of the cabins, probably," thought Weatherbee, observing that there were six cabin doors down the length of the saloon.

In the porthole recesses he saw strange white spots, which he could not at first understand. Then he noticed that the circular spots of white were the glasses of ports, which had been coated with paint inside.

Markin locked the door in the left wall at the slippered heels of the Chinese, opened a similar door in the right wall of wire, and watched Kum Lee light a second lamp on a second table, which was surrounded, like the first, with chairs. This table was attractively draped; and on it, together with books and magazines, was a sewing basket, also a dish of wild bananas and mangosteens, with a small wooden tub, in which were growing ferns.

Six cabin doors opened off this half room, whose nearest port was painted white, like those directly opposite it.

"The girl's in one of those cabins," Weatherbee concluded, for this prison was as empty as the other.

Markin let the Chinese out, locked the right-hand door, and returned to the younger man.

"Guess the folks is gettin' ready for dinner," he remarked cheerfully. "Ain't this a pretty comfortable place? Miss Lorin', she takes a lot of pains with her side of it. Looks homelike, don't it?"

Weatherbee did not reply. Mingled emotions cut off his power of speech. His excitement had increased, for the sight of this wire-partitioned saloon had helped him to realize the strange tragedy of which he was henceforth to be an observer, if not a partaker.

He felt a deep and moving pity for the man and the girl so cruelly shut away here. He felt, also, more anger than he would have cared to confess against the man who had imprisoned these two in this dark place.

Raising his voice, Markin now called a second time.

"Mr. Houghton!" he cried. "Can you come out a minute? Here's somebody I want you to meet."

There was a movement both to right and left — the simultaneous opening of two doors. To his right, however, Weatherbee could see no one. The door had been opened only a few inches. Evidently the girl was peering out at her jailer and his companion through the narrow opening.

On the left, close at hand, he could see in the gloom a longish white patch, centering some moving thing that was jet black. The patch moved forward, and Weatherbee saw a tall, clean-shaven, well groomed, distinguished-looking man, whose dark hair was carefully combed, and whose face was pale and grave.

"What under the shining—"

Hand to forehead in astonishment, and staring almost wildly, what took Weatherbee's eyes from the extraordinary appearance of the man was the sudden opening of that door to the right which for some moments had been only ajar. Now, as it swung wide, through it, out of a brightly lighted and commodious cabin, came a young woman, tall and slender. Her dark hair was dressed high. With the light at her back, he could not clearly see her face; but her dress—

Weatherbee gasped, scarcely able to credit his senses. The pity he felt increased, stinging his throat and scalding his eyes.

Her dress was white. It was cut out below her slender throat. The sleeves were of some sheer material, long and flowing. Weatherbee knew little about the costumes of women, but enough to understand that this girl was wearing neither a lounging robe nor a tea gown. What she had on convinced him that imprisonment in this sunless, humid dark, loneliness, and what other suffering he could not yet even guess at, had sickened the mind of this girl, as well as the brain of the quiet-mannered man across from her.

For, in spite of these extraordinary surroundings, and the uncomfortable temperature, both prisoners were in full evening dress.

VII

"YES, they've both gone clean crazy," Weatherbee told himself again; "and because he meant to lock me up for the night down here with them, one thing Markin failed to tell me was their mental state. How strangely the malady has affected them! I've heard of people who believed they were kings and queens, but such patients don't usually take the trouble to look the part. Here, though, shut away for all these months, these two put on their dress clothes!"

Markin's greeting to the prisoners was kind enough, and not in the least discourteous.

"Good evenin'!" he began cheerily, turning his look from one to the other, and touching the brim of his hat. "I've got a surprise for you! Here's company come!"

The figure of the man bent itself slightly, as if in well bred acknowledgment of Markin's announcement. The slender figure of the woman, standing out ghostly in its white frock, remained rigidly still.

"This is Mr. Francis Weatherbee," Markin went on. "Our new passenger," he added, somewhat jocosely. Then, to Weatherbee, with a throwing out of one hand: "Mr. William Houghton — and if you'll come along, I'll just let you into his room."

Weatherbee bowed — to the white-clad figure first, next to Houghton. Then, as

Markin led the way along the wire-walled corridor, the younger man followed him to the door which swung between the ceiling and the cabin floor. The door unlocked and opened, Weatherbee stepped across the coaming, feeling himself, at the moment, anything but welcome, and decidedly ill at ease, yet not knowing, under the circumstances, what else there was for him to do.

As he halted close to the door, it clicked shut behind him. At his back, Markin began to speak again, in that pleasant, good-humored tone:

"This lady, Mr. Weatherbee, is Miss Ellice Loring."

Weatherbee half turned, repeated his bow, and noted that the girl still gave no sign that she either saw the newcomer or heard her jailer. Without being able to see her face, the newcomer sensed that she felt hot and fierce resentment.

He recalled what he had heard her say that morning, through the speaking tube in the chart room.

"She certainly sounded forcible," he thought; "but I'll be hanged if she sounded insane. Now, without a doubt, she's angry clean through. I shouldn't wonder if I'm not a lot safer in this cage than I'd be in the other!"

Markin was talking once more, and as affably as ever.

"I'll leave you two gents now," he said. "Shouldn't wonder if you'll have a lot you'll want to say to each other. Mr. Houghton, I've told our friend, here, the reasons why the Tai-Lan's in this swamp. You'll see I ain't lied about you; and I believe he's give me the straight stuff about himself, too. Now I'll run along. It 'll be time soon for me to look after the insurance machine."

With another touch of his hat brim, and with a nod to right and left, he was gone up the stairway.

Weatherbee stayed where he was. A few feet from him, motionless, waited Houghton. In the latter's fingers was a lighted cigarette. This he lifted to his lips, drew upon it slowly, then as slowly dropped his arm to his side.

The silence disconcerted the visitor. For a moment, he almost believed himself to be in danger. He had a sudden vision of being attacked, of a violent struggle with this voiceless madman in dinner clothes, who might be spurred on to murder him by a woman equally mad.

"Wish I'd held back from coming down!" he thought. "I'd rather be tied to a deck chair than have the life choked out of me. No pistol, either—nothing but my bare hands. Wonder if I hadn't better yell for Markin! I've half a mind to; but that might excite this chap's crazy brain."

A first movement in the other enclosure across the wire corridor—the slender form was advancing a step.

Another moment, and Houghton also moved—toward the table. This brought him almost directly below the lighted gimbal; and now Weatherbee was able to see his companion more clearly. He saw that Houghton was perhaps thirty-five years of age, and in height and weight and general build not unlike himself. The man's smooth-combed hair was slightly gray at the temples. His face was drawn, and quite startlingly pale, though not unhealthily so, but rather as if through having lost its tan by being shut away from the sun.

At once Weatherbee's apprehensions lessened—at least to the extent of ending his fear of an immediate onslaught. The eyes of the other, dark in color, and seeming to be black in that light, were level in their look, gravely inquiring, but far from severe or unkind.

"If this is a crazy man," Weatherbee concluded, "at least he's harmlessly crazy. Lunatic or not, he's a gentleman — that's dead certain. The way he holds himself shows it. Looks rather melancholy to me, but that's not to be wondered at. I wouldn't say that he's morbid. As a matter of fact, his face is really fine. He has the air of a diplomat more than anything else I can think of."

Then, as he let his look travel down from that strangely pallid face to the clothes which were so strikingly out of place in this humid prison, he gave a start as he noted that in the lapel of the prisoner's smartly pressed coat was the button of a decoration.

"I'll be eternally hanged!" Weatherbee swore silently. "In that outfit—tubbed to the nines, shaved to the blood, and immaculate—he might be just ready, in Paris, or London, or some other capital city, to leave his ambassador's residence to motor to his club!"

He found himself flatly doubting his former conclusions as to the mental condition of this reserved, perfectly poised, and obviously well bred man.

"People who are off their heads, even a little bit," he reminded himself, "don't care a hang how they look. No, this chap's as sane as I am—if not saner."

Houghton, on his part, had been steadily studying the face of his uninvited guest. His eyes—they were blue, keen, and disconcertingly penetrating—had taken on an expression of eagerness. There was also obvious inquiry in them.

"He'd like to ask me questions," Weatherbee decided; "but I don't believe he intends to speak a word to me. Well, I'm not surprised. Here's a chap that almost any woman could find more than interesting and likable. If old Stone was right about these two—if they really care a lot for each other—naturally they're not wild with joy at having a third person thrust upon them like this. I suspect that when Markin told me they'd be glad to see me, he was having his little joke. Glad? Huh! Houghton's probably sore. If he is, I don't blame him."

Once more, in the half room beyond the wire-walled corridor, the figure in white moved. Slowly it came so far forward that the same lamp which made clear Houghton's features lighted up the face of the second prisoner.

Ellice Loring halted close to the wire screen that was on her side. Turning more squarely toward her, Weatherbee found himself again compelled to alter the notion he had entertained concerning the two.

The girl before him was plainly not suffering from any mental disorder. Her large, moist eyes, dark and brilliant, were as steady and keen as those of her companion in punishment. They were set in a face so pale that it seemed milk-white. It was strangely and appealingly beautiful.

Above its delicate oval the low brow was framed by thick, black hair which laid a wavelike outline against either temple. Her nose was straight and a trifle thin, and had, at its center, the mere suggestion of a ripple. Her pale lips, full and soft, like a child's, were caught in so that their expression was wistful.

Weatherbee remembered that he had seen just such faces in the paintings of old masters. Not that it was the face of a Madonna or a saint, such as were to be seen in depictions of sacred subjects. Rather was it a type, half child, half woman, which was dear to certain great painters of the profane in the early sixteenth century.

"I have it!" he decided. "It's Florentine. Yes, she's like a reincarnation of one of the famous beauties of Tuscany. She might be the very pearl of Siena, or a woman of the Medicis. There's poise there, and breeding; and, above all, there's courage!"

It seemed to him as if he could not take his eyes from her. All at once he began to feel that the whole thing was unreal—dreamlike, as if by some magic he had been carried back into the Middle Ages, and into the plots and cruelties of those bygone times.

"Here is Marguerite of Valois," he said to himself, "come back to endure again in the bowels of this hidden ship!"

As she looked across at him, she did not speak. Draped softly with the filmy white chiffon that made the sleeves of her gown, her young, marble-white arms hung down at her sides. Her hands kept opening and shutting, opening and shutting. Her breast heaved.

Weatherbee remembered old Thaddeus Stone, and found it possible to pity him.

"I can understand how she must have taken every one by storm," he thought. "She must have been terribly precious to him. Never mind the difference of years that made them so unsuited to each other. I can understand his jealousy, too. Heavens, but can't I? How he must have suffered! All day long I've been picturing her; but I didn't have the slightest idea of what an exquisite young thing she is. A perfect girl! A princess of a girl!"

As, fascinated and filled with wonderment at the sight of her, Weatherbee continued to gaze at her face, he saw it gradually change. Anger had gleamed from those dark eyes at first; dislike, too, and an imperious challenge. Now anger was not wholly absent, but the look that Weatherbee noticed was one of an almost terrible eagerness.

"And hope," he added inwardly.

The white face was indeed a mask of hungry longing. It was as if she was saying to him silently:

"Why have you come? What is behind your coming? Are you here to help us? *Are* you?"

Presently she lifted one hand and laid it against her bosom, over her heart. Weatherbee saw how the hand trembled, and once more he felt that poignant pity.

As if she found the long silence a strain, suddenly she averted her eyes and lowered her head. Now Weatherbee swung back to face Houghton. The other man was standing as before, straight, still, patient, yet alert. His eyes, too, were charged with mute questions.

A moment, and he did something which, at the time, seemed to Weatherbee a curious thing for any man to do under the circumstances, though it did not convey to the visitor the fact that it had a meaning. Carelessly, as if he were busy with his thoughts, and pitching the melody low, he began to whistle. The tune was "Annie Laurie."

He stopped. Whereupon Weatherbee, feeling a sudden embarrassment, spoke for the first time, his voice earnest enough, but none too steady.

"Mr. Houghton," he began, "this is the most appalling experience I've ever had in all my life!"

This observation seemed to convey an answer to the other man. Like a person who has, all at once, been absolutely convinced of some unwelcome truth, he turned away, his shoulders stooped, his look on the deck. It was obvious that he was disappointed.

Evidently the girl shared his feelings. She gave a low cry, turned from the wire wall, took one step, and dropped into a deep chair. There, her slender hands covering her face, she began to weep bitterly.

VIII

For a while, in the dim, divided room, all that could be heard was the sound of the girl's sobbing. The two men stood looking at her, both helpless and troubled. In particular, Houghton appeared profoundly disturbed by her grief; but he controlled himself, and, at first, did not even make an effort to calm her.

As for Weatherbee, he found that his own eyes were swimming. Shaking himself, as if to get rid of what must surely be only a hideous nightmare, he fell to walking back and forth in the saloon prison.

The violence of her paroxysm of grief having gradually subsided, Ellice Loring began to speak, her voice trembling and breaking.

"There's no use to hope for anything different!" she declared. "No use! No use! Oh, what have I ever done to deserve this? Won't anybody ever come to take me out of here? I know I'll never see the sun again! It's too hard to bear! I can't endure it! I can't! I can't! It's unjust! It's cruel! My life's slipping away in darkness! I'm locked up as if I were alive in a grave! Without a trial, too! Without a chance! I tell you, I could bear it if I deserved it, but I haven't done anything wrong! I haven't! And here he's put me—to stay until I die!"

Houghton spoke then, as gently as to a child.

"Don't cry, Ellice," he pleaded. "Don't lose your courage. It's not quite so bad as that. One of these days, he'll come to realize the enormity of what he's done, or he'll begin to doubt that he's been right and just about it."

She did not appear to hear him.

"Oh, mother, if you and father were only alive again!" she wept. "But there's nobody left who'll miss me enough to hunt for me—nobody in all the world who cares where I am! Oh, mother, if I could only have you back for one minute! If you'd only come and take me, mother! I don't want to live! Father used to tell me that God watches over us, and that no one is ever forgotten. Mother, has God forgotten me?"

"Ellice! Ellice!" Houghton chided. "Don't say a thing like that! You know it isn't true. It couldn't be! God hasn't forgotten you. Don't let such a terrible thought enter your mind. Can't you try to think that, beneath all you've had to endure, there may be hidden some great blessing?"

"Blessing!" she repeated. "Blessing! You've said that over and over; but it isn't so, Will! I tell you, we're going to die here!"

"You've been plucky so long," he soothed. "Don't break down now, dear girl! Don't give up! We must try to keep a good heart."

"It's all more than I can stand!" she returned. "I think of taking my life—all the time! I don't know why I haven't! It's what he wants us to do! He wants to keep us here for years—*years*—the best part of our lives—until our brains grow so sick with suffering that we'll hang or drown ourselves! *That's* what he wants to do—drive us to suicide! Oh, how have I ever stood it?"

"You've stood it," went on that quiet, reassuring voice, "because you've got good stuff in you. Also, you know you're innocent, and that keeps you up, just as it sustains me. Ellice, we must be patient a little longer—a little longer."

"*Longer?*"

Then another burst of despairing sobs; but when the second paroxysm wore itself away, she sat quietly, her black head propped on a small hand.

"Won't you go and lie down for a little while?" Houghton entreated gently. "You know you didn't have your usual afternoon nap, and you've been under a good deal of strain all day."

"I'm—I'm all right, Will," she faltered huskily.

Weatherbee guessed why she had not rested during the afternoon—why, all day, she had been under a strain.

"She's known there was a stranger aboard," he thought.

Houghton was speaking again, this time to Weatherbee.

"I'm glad you've seen this," he declared. "It's just a sample of how this poor girl has felt ever since she came. There have been times—plenty of them—when she's been wonderfully brave and strong, and even cheerful; but too often—well, it hasn't been merely a case of having one good cry now and then. She's spent hours and hours in tears, until she's fairly exhausted."

She broke in, but without turning toward them.

"I'm not crying now because I'm sorry for anything I've ever done," she protested. "I'm crying because I'm enraged—that's why. I didn't ever love that old man—why should I? But I never hated him, either, and I never wanted to do him harm, or shame him; and look what he has done to me!"

Weatherbee halted beside the elder man.

"I'm responsible for this breakdown," he said regretfully. "My coming has upset her. I'm terribly sorry, especially as I don't see yet how I can possibly be of any use to either of you."

The next moment the girl was on her feet once more, and standing against the wire netting; and Weatherbee realized that anger had indeed taken the place of sorrow.

"*Use* to us!" she cried at him scornfully. "You talk about being of use to us! Do you really think that we're so simple that we don't know you've been sent here to spy?"

Weatherbee felt his face grow hot, but he set his lips grimly and made no comment; nor did Houghton interrupt the passionate flow of her charge.

"You've been sent to watch!" she continued, her blazing eyes on his face. "To listen to everything we say, and jot it down! Perhaps, if we don't say what you think your employer would like to read, you'll change your record — to suit him. He's made up his mind, you know, and he won't want to be disappointed. Tell him that his monstrous suspicions are absolutely correct! Then, maybe, he'll let you shoot us, and our misery will be over!"

She stopped, panting hard, and holding to the crossed strands of the netting. When again he did not retort, she resumed, and now the tears ran down her white cheeks.

"But if you could only bring yourself to tell the *truth* about us!" she exclaimed. "It's more than that man Markin can do. If he did, we'd be out by now, for he knows in his heart—oh, but he hasn't got one—that we don't deserve the mistreatment he's helped to heap on us! Have *you* any feelings? Any imagination? You're here to carry out some trick! I know it, because he would never send any one who would help us. Ha-a-a-a! You ought to be proud of yourself! But I tell you, that awful old man is wrong—wrong—*wrong!*"

Her voice rose almost to a scream.

"And won't you try, before you report to your master, to realize what it has meant to two innocent people to be shut up in this hot and dark place for fourteen long months?"

Weatherbee went close to the woven wall on his side. There, for a little while, he stood and gazed across at the girl, his brows drawn together in a worried frown as he tried to think how best he could answer her.

"Yes, I have feelings," he said at last; "and may I remind you—most respectfully, I assure you—that you yourself bitterly resent the fact that Mr. Stone jumped to his conclusions before you could have a chance to speak in your own defense? Well, don't you feel that you would be more just if you could see your way clear to giving *me* the benefit of the doubt? My dear young woman, *you're* jumping to conclusions before you've listened to *my* story!"

Houghton broke in, his grave face suddenly lightened with earnestness.

"You're quite right, Mr. Weatherbee—we haven't any right to blame you or abuse you until we know the facts. Of course, it may be that you've changed your mind about us during this last quarter of an hour. I hope that you have, and that you'll treat us fairly; but surely you're not going to tell us that Stone sent you here to help us?"

"I don't blame you for not trusting me on sight," Weatherbee answered. "I don't even blame you for going after me hot-shot, because I have enough imagination to realize that you've both suffered beyond words down in this place—suffered mentally and physically, and that you're bound to feel strongly; but suppose I *haven't* been hired? Suppose Stone *isn't* my master? I can solemnly promise you both that I'll tell nothing but the truth about you—that is, if I ever get the chance to tell anybody anything about you. Though you probably won't believe it, I wasn't sent here, either to help you or to hurt you, for the reason that I wasn't sent here at all. Last night, out beyond the mouth of the river, I deserted the schooner I was in, and for no other reason — I swear it — than that I wasn't getting along with the mate. About sunup, I heard a gong, I pulled my boat in to locate the sound, and here I am. I'm much more surprised to find the Tai-Lan, and you in her, than you can possibly be to see me."

Houghton bowed, and Weatherbee, looking at him, thought he saw a change in the expression of the other man's eyes. They seemed kinder, more frank, as if their owner were half inclined to believe.

"You have my sympathy," he said.

"Oh, I know already that I shan't be allowed to leave the Tai-Lan," Weatherbee added quickly. "I can only say that I'm sorry to have my society thrust upon you like this, whether you want me around or not. I have an overwhelming sense of being an intruder and a nuisance."

"Not at all! Miss Loring and I need company. I'm afraid I haven't been as hospitable as I might have been, owing to suspicions which I hope you'll understand were quite natural."

"I don't blame you," Weatherbee repeated. "It will take time for you to realize that what I've told you is true, and that if I'm not yet your friend, at least I'm not an enemy."

"Please sit down."

Weatherbee once more turned toward the girl. She, understanding that he would not accept Houghton's invitation while she was standing, retreated a few steps and again sank into a chair. Weatherbee followed suit, received a cigarette and a light from his new host, and then settled back to smoke in a silence that was general.

To Weatherbee, it was also not a little embarrassing. He tried to think of something he could say that would lift from him the onus of their suspicion. Presently he leaned toward Houghton.

"You know of the clockwork contrivance?" he asked, making sure that not even the girl could hear him.

"Yes, indeed," Houghton replied.

His tone was careless and ironical.

"To run an old ship in here and hide her," Weatherbee continued, "is simple enough; but only a devil in human form could deliberately plant the other things."

Houghton shrugged. Weatherbee's embarrassment increased to mortification.

"I'm certainly in the way," he thought. "While I'm here, they feel they can't even talk."

Then he remembered how, when he was in the chart house, he had heard her speak. He had been puzzled then; but now, of a sudden, what had seemed so strange to him was clearly explained. He rose and stepped close to Houghton, leaned down, and, addressing his fellow prisoner, kept his voice lowered cautiously.

"This morning, when I came aboard," he began, "and thought the old hulk was deserted, I happened to go into the pilot house. As I was looking around in there, I heard Miss Loring speak."

Houghton glanced up.

"That's hardly possible, Mr. Weatherbee," he answered.

"I did, just the same," persisted Weatherbee earnestly. "I can tell you what I heard—not word for word, but the gist of it, anyhow. She said that if a punishment is deserved, why—"

Houghton did not let him finish. Eyes staring in amazement, the elder man got to his feet and caught Weatherbee by the shoulder.

"By Heaven, you did hear!" he exclaimed. "And if *you* could hear like that, *he's* been able to hear—right along—since the first!"

Once more the girl broke in, turning to face them.

"What are you saying?" she demanded. "I want to hear what it is. Don't keep anything from me—please!"

Houghton warned her to silence by touching his lips with a finger. Then again he questioned Weatherbee.

"How could you hear that?" he whispered. "How do you explain it?"

"The pilot house—that explains it. From somewhere down here a speaking tube runs up."

Under his breath Houghton breathed another exclamation, and one that registered disgust.

"Of course!" he agreed. "You've hit on it! He sits up there in the pilot house, and if we lift our voices at all, he can hear every word we say. That's how he always knows the way things are going down here. We knew he did, but we couldn't understand it. It seemed uncanny, as if he had a strange power. That's also why he knows that we two—just as Miss Loring said this morning—have been shut up here when we have done nothing to deserve such a terrible punishment."

"As I didn't hear you," Weatherbee went on, "but only Miss Loring, I judge the tube's on the other side."

"Ellice!" called Houghton softly.

Weatherbee hastened to check him.

"Don't ask Miss Loring to close it," he advised. "Don't you see? That would make Markin suspicious. He'll think I didn't just happen to come along, and that we're up to something, and there's no telling what he'll do. That tube can be mighty useful to us, now that we know it's there. When we've got something to say that we don't want him to hear, we can stuff it. At all other times, we can give him, through it, just what we'd like him to hear."

The girl had risen and was standing directly across from them.

"What is it, Will?" she asked.

As if noting that Houghton's manner had undergone a change, though she could not know what had caused that change, now she, too, had a different attitude. She looked at Weatherbee more kindly, and with fresh interest.

Houghton nodded across to her, and smiled.

"Later," he said laconically; then, to Weatherbee: "I'm certainly obliged to you."

"That's all right. Don't thank me. I'm only too glad there is something I can do for you—though I can see that you still doubt me."

"No, upon my word, Mr. Weatherbee!"

"If I were here to spy," the younger man pointed out, "I couldn't do anything keener than bolster your faith in me by seeming to work for you and against Markin. With me here to listen to you, you might reason that the Stone combination doesn't need a tube, because I'll be the talebearer."

Even in that dim light he was able to see that the other man had flushed, as if with confusion.

"In a way, Weatherbee," the latter confessed, "you've read my thoughts; but please believe two things—in the first place, Miss Loring and I have no secrets, and you're welcome to hear whatever we say to each other. Also this—that in my heart there is the sincere wish to trust you. I honestly believe you wouldn't tell me about the tube if you were an enemy."

Weatherbee laughed.

"Not unless I'm a mighty crafty enemy, and did it to ingratiate myself, or throw you off the track."

"The fact remains that, as Miss Loring and I are here because of unjust suspicions, we're more than anxious to have you come, even from Mr. Stone, if you're here to learn the truth. The more successful you are as a spy, the better we shall like it. All we ask is that you report the facts."

The girl had heard a part of what they had been saying. Now she addressed Weatherbee once more.

"I never cared for Mr. Houghton," she asserted vehemently, "except as a good friend, and he never cared for me. That's the truth. Why, he's in love with another woman—aren't you, Will?"

Houghton laughed.

"I suppose, as long as you're a married person," he answered half whimsically, "and make the declaration of your absolute indifference to me, that it isn't ungallant for me to admit that I really am in love with—with some one else, God keep her!"

Now there came a pleasant interruption, in the shape of a dark face which, of a sudden, showed itself in a small, windowlike aperture that opened into Houghton's part of the saloon from the cross corridor aft. It was the smiling face of the Celestial.

"Ah, Kum Lee!" Houghton sang out cheerfully. "Dinner ready?"

The answer was a vigorous nod and a grin. The next moment, with a scraping sound, a dish-loaded tray was pushed through the aperture. As Houghton went to receive the tray, and fetch it to the end of the long table, a tray for Weatherbee followed, and the window closed.

Then a second window opened beyond the wire-walled corridor, at the end of the other half saloon, and a third meal made its appearance. The girl shook her head at it.

"Never mind anything for me, Kum Lee," she said.

Houghton hastened to interfere.

"Now, you must eat something, Ellice," he declared. "You haven't eaten all day, and you look as white as milk. It's important, you know, that we should take care of our health. You've preached that to me many a time. Now please act upon it yourself. If you're taken sick, I shan't be able to do much for you. It will only increase the awfulness of our situation."

"All right—I'll try to eat."

She went to take her own tray and carry it to a chair facing her two companions. Not until she had seated herself did the men eat. Weatherbee, glancing at the various dishes before him, exclaimed over the abundance and the evident quality of the dinner.

"How do you come by such a luxury as water-cooled butter?" he inquired.

"Regular trips are made here with supplies," Houghton informed him. "Every two months or so we hear boxes and barrels coming overside."

"It's a wonder the supply vessel doesn't get found out."

Houghton laughed.

"Well, naturally, it doesn't clear for this mangrove jungle on the coast of Borneo, and the missing steamer, Tai-Lan."

"Good chow!" pronounced Weatherbee enthusiastically. "Here I am eating again, and I've just had one dinner."

"Well, it's one thing we're thankful for," said Houghton. "I must admit that we're provided with good food. Ellice, how are you getting on?"

"Nicely."

"Splendid! I must admit, Mr. Weatherbee, that it's pleasant to have a new face at the dinner table. I'm genuinely glad you're here."

"I'm glad to be here," Weatherbee answered; "and still more glad to hear you say I'm not unwelcome. If you only knew what an improvement this meal is over what I've been enduring! I've been aboard a vessel that had a captain who was blind drunk most of the time, and a mate who was the devil in dungarees."

"What was his name?"

The question came from beyond the wire-walled corridor.

"Noakes."

"Noakes!" Houghton repeated. "That's not the name of the chap who's been coming as mate on trips to supply us, so you weren't on one of Stone's vessels."

"If the skipper's habitually in a state of coma from gin," replied Weatherbee, "I argue that he must be at least a part owner."

"Sound arguing," conceded the other man.

"He wasn't such a bad soul," Weatherbee went on, "when he was sober—which wasn't often. But the mate! That lad's a lunatic, and a dangerous one at that. To me, he fits the description of Satan incarnate. I'm thankful his eyes can't penetrate mangrove jungles, for the schooner may be lying off the mouth of the river yet. She was anchored, you see, and the crew were chipping and painting."

At that, Houghton laid down his fork and lifted his head to look straight at his guest.

"*Anchored?*" he repeated. "Somehow I don't like the sound of that. What was your skipper's name, Mr. Weatherbee?"

"Blodgett."

The other man was up on the instant.

"Blodgett!" he said guardedly. "The Lillebonne!"

Aghast, Weatherbee also got up.

"Yes; but to-day, when I told Markin about—"

Houghton gestured for silence.

"Man alive!" he exclaimed, under his breath. "Of course Markin wouldn't admit to you that the Lillebonne—is Stone's schooner!"

"Will! *Will!*"

"S-s-s-h!"

Weatherbee was like a man in a dream.

"I can't believe it!"

"One of Stone's schooners," Houghton went on, and his voice was full of foreboding. "What are we in for now—I and this helpless girl? A Stone schooner, and a man aboard that you say *you* couldn't stand!"

Looking into Houghton's wide-open eyes, Weatherbee felt that he understood the thought that was in the other man's brain. Until now, cruel as had been the imprisonment in the dark saloon of the lost Tai-Lan, nevertheless the two had been treated with a measure of courtesy, and spared bodily punishment; but with Noakes coming! Was the mate being sent to carry out orders from which other men had shrunk?

"God protect us all," breathed Weatherbee, "from that terrible fiend!"

IX

"WHAT'S the matter now? What has happened?"

It was Ellice Loring, laying down her knife and fork while she peered through the double screen of wire. Weatherbee turned a smiling face her way, and answered as casually as possible.

"We were just exchanging opinions on certain gentlemen that we've had to deal with. Please don't let us interrupt your dinner, and spoil your appetite."

For a moment longer she continued to gaze across at her companions, her level brows brought together in a troubled little frown.

"I thought you both seemed very much excited," she said, "as if—as if—"

Houghton sat down again.

"It wasn't anything," he protested lightly. "Mr. Weatherbee was a bit stirred up, as you say — naturally, enough, too, because he has just found out that the schooner he deserted is our supply ship."

She opened her dark eyes wide.

"No!"

Weatherbee nodded. Then he inquired, speaking low:

"Which cabin over on that side used to be the captain's cabin?"

She pointed toward a door that stood open.

"That one."

"Would you mind closing it?"

As she assented and rose quickly, Weatherbee once more leaned down to Houghton.

"You and Miss Loring aren't going to suffer from this fellow Noakes," he declared. "If he comes after anybody, it 'll be me!"

"Are you armed?"

"Markin took my revolver."

Houghton drew his breath sharply through his teeth.

"Sorry about that; but it can't be helped, and perhaps the only way they'll be able to punish you is by leaving you shut up down here with us."

"I hope so." Weatherbee strove to hide the worried state of his feelings. "I understand now why the Lillebonne was anchored, and had her dinghy over the side. When they find me here, they'll laugh their heads off to hear that I walked into this trap!"

The girl had returned to her table.

"What is there about that cabin?" she inquired, also keeping her voice low.

"Speaking tube," Weatherbee explained.

Her own lips silently framed the words, and she raised both hands to express her astonishment. Then she seated herself once more, but only stared at her tray. After a moment, as if struck by a sudden thought which frightened her, she stood up again, and came to stand as close to the men as possible.

"But, Mr. Weatherbee," she argued, "won't it be pretty bad for you, if they find you here? You deserted them, you know; and won't his men—"

She paused, as if not liking to put her thought into speech. Weatherbee bowed gravely.

"It's mighty kind of you to think of my situation," he told her. "I appreciate it. Maybe I am in a jam, but I fancy that the worst they'll do to me is to give me a tongue lashing, and I only hope that it won't disturb you too much."

"They think you're a spy," she returned. "That's why they treated you so badly that you left them. They thought you knew you were on a Stone ship, or they were afraid you'd find out about us."

Houghton broke in, managing a laugh.

"Well, don't you see how delighted they'll be to find Mr. Weatherbee here?" he pointed out. "Spy or no spy, they won't have to hunt him up the river; and they won't have to worry on the score of what he can tell against them. Here he is, and here he'll stay!"

But her fears were not lessened. She pressed her face against the wire.

"You don't think they might take you out," she whispered tremulously, "and—and—"

"Shoot me?" asked Weatherbee. "No, I'm not afraid of that; so please don't let such a thought disturb you. To shut people up is one thing; to go to the extent of murdering is another. As for yourselves, you know there's no danger. The Lillebonne has been here before."

"There's nothing to do but wait and see what develops," she said resignedly.

Head bent thoughtfully, she turned about and went back to her chair.

"I suppose," Houghton observed to Weatherbee, "that there isn't a chance that Markin might keep his mouth shut about you?"

"It's too much to hope for. He won't do that."

He dropped into his chair.

"He could put you away in a cabin."

Weatherbee shook his head.

"He's a crafty old boy!" he admitted, with a rueful laugh. "As I talked to him, I didn't suspect that the Lillebonne meant anything to him. I didn't fret on the score of her finding me, seeing that he wasn't at all concerned over the fact that there was a schooner lurking outside. I felt myself as safe as he did. How he must have chuckled as he listened to me!"

Neither returned to their interrupted meal. As all of the white-painted ports in the saloon were half open, permitting a meager draft of warm air to circulate through the divided room, the two men were able to smoke, while up and down the narrow corridor romped those half dozen kittens.

"They've been a joy to me, those babies," Ellice Loring confessed, and found it possible to laugh heartily at some of the antics of the sportive brood.

Houghton had a number of questions to ask about matters which had transpired in the outside world during the term of his imprisonment.

"I feel as if I'd been here fourteen years instead of fourteen months," he remarked. "The hardest part of this whole thing is that all my relations believe I'm at the bottom of the China Sea—and my friends, too. The time seems to drag, and that makes me feel that great changes must have taken place in the world since I disappeared. What's the news, Mr. Weatherbee? Any great discoveries, or big political changes?"

Weatherbee, having reminded the other that he himself had been traveling through the Orient during those same fourteen months, and had therefore, to a certain extent, been cut off from news of the civilized world, briefly gave such information as he possessed.

When he finished, it was not through his choice that the subject of the imprisonment of his companions again came to be discussed; nor did Houghton begin it. It was the girl who inquired whether or not he knew their story.

"I know only what Markin told me," Weatherbee answered.

"I'd like to know how much fiction he has added to his version of it," she said, half questioningly.

When he had reviewed Markin's account, beginning with Stone's meeting with the island girl, and ending with the Tai-Lan's departure from Manila, ostensibly for Hongkong, she, as well as Houghton, was forced to admit that Weatherbee substantially had the facts.

"So far as they go," she said; "but what he didn't tell you was that my husband was obsessed with jealousy. It amounted to insanity. Before we reached Manila, he was charming to me, and of course I wasn't able to look ahead. I presume I was one of the greenest white girls—speaking socially, that is—who had ever arrived at the port of Manila. I had never seen anything, and had met only a few men who were Caucasians. I couldn't realize the kind of a bargain I had made. I couldn't see Thaddeus Stone as he would appear beside other men, or understand how he might change in the future. At first, however, everything went beautifully. You can imagine that, never having been farther away from our island than the reef that encircled it, and having lived in nothing better than a very pretty little grass bungalow, Mr. Stone's yacht, and my rooms in the Manila Hotel, my gowns, and all the other lovely things that he lavished on me, made my new life seem like a fairyland. I really liked him then. I was grateful for all he had given me, and for his kindness to my mother.

"Then I had a terrible awakening. It was about two months after our arrival in the Philippines. One day, like the bursting of a typhoon, he came at me with charges that stunned me. I had met Mr. Houghton at a dance the army people gave at the English Club. Mr. Houghton didn't dance, and so we sat out a number together, and talked. My husband had been acting queerly for several days, and I was downcast and miserable. I hadn't wanted to bother mother with my worries, but I did long to unload my heartache on somebody. Foolishly, I suppose, I made a confidant of Mr. Houghton. My husband must either have hidden and listened to us himself, or have got some one else to do it. Anyhow, he charged me with being in love with Mr. Houghton, and talking against himself.

"Well, I had confessed that I had made a mistake and was not happy; but I hadn't criticised my husband. His tirade appalled me. I didn't answer him. I was too much insulted and too angry. And he had hurt mother, too. I felt I couldn't forgive him for that.

"He begged my pardon. He took everything back. I tried to forget—tried to like him as much as ever; but I couldn't, because he had been unjust. I know I was cold. Then things suddenly got worse. I found that he had spies watching me—I was under observation by my own servants. Many a time, when I was telephoning, I would find him listening. He even opened my letters.

"Just then my mother fell sick, and I forgot everything else in taking care of her. When I lost her, I was distracted and heartbroken, and didn't care whether I lived or died. I had no friends, no relations, to turn to for comfort. I didn't have a single person about me that I could trust. I was absolutely alone with that hideous, jealous, old man.

"I wanted to get away. I thought of Hongkong. I told my husband that I needed a change of climate. It would help me to forget my grief. He fell in with my wishes, and had two cabins of the Tai-Lan thrown together for me, to make me comfortable on the passage. You may imagine my feelings when, the afternoon I sailed, I discovered that Mr. Houghton was aboard as a passenger. I didn't know what to do. I was too unhappy to do the sensible thing—try to have the steamer turned back for Manila. I had just one thought, and that was to get away and be alone for a little while. I told myself that during the whole trip I wouldn't let myself get out of sight of my maid. I ordered her to occupy my cabin with me."

"I had booked passage without knowing that Miss Loring was aboard," Houghton interposed. "Of course, that was reported to Stone before we sailed, and he laid his plans accordingly."

"But there we both were," the girl went on, "and it clinched matters for my husband. He thought we were eloping. The sailing was held up three or four hours. That gave time for a change of skippers and crew. When the Tai-Lan left Manila Bay, the Stone yacht started for this place. Two days later, the Tai-Lan turned from her course for Hongkong, and made for here. I didn't know that, of course. When I saw the coast of Borneo, I thought I was seeing China. Mr. Houghton would have known better, but by that time he was a prisoner in his cabin. I was locked up next. Then the steamer was brought into the river, and softly and silently backed, during the night, into the mangroves. You know the rest."

Her voice once more shaking with passion, she went on vehemently:

"He always made a point, toward the last, of impressing on people how much he cared for me. Cared for me—when he was getting ready to send me to this torture!"

"Stone's yacht, the Arcadia, took off the captain, the native mates, and the crew," Houghton explained. "Those left are the same you find to-day—with the exception of Yatin, a Malay, who tried to get away."

"But a secret of this kind — isn't it known by too many to be safe for Stone?" Weatherbee asked.

"Stone has mines, and all other sorts of holdings in far places of the world," Houghton reminded. "No doubt he scattered the officers and crew to remote countries with his yacht—paid them well, too, to stay hidden. It may be that few of them knew what was going on; and as most of those were natives, they even might be put out of the way. As for Dukun and Kum Lee, both of them are ex-convicts. There may be charges of some kind hanging over them—and over Markin, too. That's how men are made safe for a job of this sort—through fear of punishment by the authorities."

"There's one thing I can't understand," said Weatherbee. "Why has Stone allowed you every comfort—good food, and books, and a piano, and servants to wait on you? Suppose he had made you drudge for your meals! He could have done it."

"Yes, and I'm surprised," the girl broke in, "that he has allowed us to see each other. He could have put up a solid wall, or locked us away in solitary confinement. I suppose we ought to be thankful that we haven't been whipped and starved."

Houghton looked thoughtful.

"A person might reason that the comforts you've mentioned, Mr. Weatherbee," he said, "and the arrangements down here in the dining saloon, are all expressions of the old man's decency; but I'm afraid the opposite is true. His plan has the subtlety of an insane person's brain. We have comforts—yes. That means that we don't have to worry about food, and so on. We can have all the time in the clock to think about our imprisonment. We can center our minds on one thing—the cruel loss of our freedom."

"If that argument's sound, why not solitary confinement, because that would give you an even better chance to think?"

"I fancy he figured that the joy we should find in each other's society would be only temporary. He believed we should begin by fretting to be free together, and end by hating the sight of each other, and blaming each other, and quarreling."

"I blame myself," declared the girl. "I deserve to be punished for marrying a man so much older than myself. I was crazy when I did it—I know that now; but I had been so poor all my life, and mother had had such a hard time making both ends meet, and, oh, I did so long to give her the comforts! You see, I didn't care for anybody else. Poor mother felt that she wasn't going to live very long, and she was thinking of me when she consented. She wanted to feel that I was settled, and safe."

"Now, Ellice," Houghton said cheerfully, "would you reason that a child was being punished if it happened to get in the way of a wild beast? You were an inexperienced child. You have been shamefully treated. That's all there is to it."

"No," she contradicted stubbornly. Her dark eyes were grave and earnest. "I sinned when I married a man I didn't care for. I was tired of the island, and of being poor, and seeing mother do without all sorts of comforts. He was a way out. I thought I could solve things by marrying him. I know now that none of us get anything without paying for it."

"Then you've squared the account, Ellice," Houghton returned firmly. "I think, in this world, that that's all we're expected to do."

"Yes," Weatherbee agreed; "and perhaps the hour of deliverance is at hand."

"Ha-a-a!" she breathed doubtfully. "I'm afraid it isn't here yet."

"It might be," he urged.

She looked at him through tears, her lips trembling.

"Deliverance how?" she asked. "By death?"

"No," he answered. "Not death. Honestly, I believe it. Somehow or other, this thing is coming to an end. I can't help but feel that there are things about this whole business—my coming on the schooner, and being driven off it, and getting in here—that we don't understand. At first Noakes was decent enough to me. Why didn't he object to me while we were in port, when he could have got rid of me? No—he waited until we were at sea. And why was he particularly ugly as soon as we got off this river mouth? Did he want me to leave? Doesn't it strike you as strange that I should have been allowed to get away from the Lillebonne right here? It does to me. This is one place where you would figure they'd watch me closest."

"There's something in what you say," conceded Houghton. "I've been wondering myself how it happened that any one was able to drop off the Lillebonne the way you did, when she was so near to the big secret."

"When you leave here," Weatherbee went on, "in no time the whole experience will seem to you like a dream. Frankly, neither of you look ill. I'm not trying to underestimate what you've suffered, but I do say that your stay here doesn't seem to have done you any harm that will be lasting. I wish you'd tell me how you've managed it."

Houghton laughed.

"I fancy the program explains us," he answered. "In the beginning, not knowing how long we might be here, and realizing that the time would pass slowly, I figured out what we had to do. Of course, the first few days, the shock was terrible, and we were both like caged animals; but then we became calmer, and promised to help each other in the matter of keeping busy. We planned how we would do it. We made it our job. It was the only thing to do, if we were ever to come out of this saloon with well minds and bodies. I suppose, for instance, that you're surprised to see us dressed the way we are."

There was something like a twinkle in Houghton's eyes. Weatherbee grinned.

"I admit I am."

"You'll understand when I explain. During those first desperate days, we lost track of the time. We didn't know what end of the week it was, and Markin didn't appear to be disposed to tell us."

"He seems a fairly good-natured person," broke in Weatherbee.

"Yes? But perhaps you haven't crossed his bows yet, or he wanted to keep you in a good temper until you had met us. Anyhow, he didn't set us right about the calendar, so I fixed one up for myself. It provided for six week days of activity, and a Sunday of rest and change. Thanks to Kum Lee, we've always had plenty of fresh, clear water for our dressing rooms. Every morning, after we are dressed for the day, we go through our exercises—breathing, and setting up, and so on. That is to keep us in good physical trim. Then we have breakfast. After breakfast, there are all sorts of little jobs—setting the place to rights, and hanging up clothes, and so on. When we're in order, down we sit, and while Miss Loring mends or sews or embroiders, I read. By a lucky chance, when I took passage on the Tai-Lan, I had with me one trunk that was filled with nothing but books—good, substantial stuff. Well, we have an hour of biography, or travel, or sociology, or psychology. Next, for an hour, we discuss what I've read. If there's something we don't understand, we go back and read it again, and clear it up."

"Sort of home university course," said Weatherbee.

"It is for me," assented the girl. "Will's a regular professor!"

"We have made it a strict rule to change for lunch. Kum Lee shaves me. Sometimes he cuts my hair. Then we both come forth in the lightest, freshest duds we have. After we eat, and rest for a bit, we have French, or Latin, or Greek—two afternoons a week to each language. A siesta follows; then tea. After tea, we turn to fiction, until it's time to dress for dinner."

"You're certainly two good sports!" commented Weatherbee, sincerely impressed. "That's what I call courage. Dressing for dinner!"

"The way I came to figure out the clothes proposition was this," Houghton continued. "One day, at the first, Miss Loring felt better than usual, and she came out of her cabin in a light, pretty dress. She looked a picture, and I told her so. That evening she ate better than she had at any meal up till then. She seemed more cheerful, too; and I had my idea. I urged her to keep up her dressing, and I followed suit. To make the evenings seem shorter, and to get tired enough to sleep, we set our dinner hour late. Happened I came across a book of mine that had something about the psychology of clothes—what a lot they have to do with the way a man or woman feels, how they help to establish and keep up one's self-respect, and sort of renew one's spirit, so that one won't want to lie down and die. We congratulated ourselves on that part of our program. So—here you see us."

"You're wonders!" Weatherbee declared. "I would like to join in your program, only I'm not going to be able to make much of an appearance when it comes to clothes."

Houghton rose.

"Come with me," he invited.

He led the way to the cabin nearest the galley. On opening the door, Weatherbee saw that a bar of rough wood had been nailed into place the whole length of the small room. On the bar hung a number of suits of clothes, white and pongee mingling with gray and black.

"To-night, before you tumble in," went on Houghton, "just help yourself to anything here that you want. Lee's an excellent laundryman, and keeps my linen in fine shape. He likes to be busy, too, for it must be deadly dull to all the men who have been placed here to watch us. The laundry gives him something to do, and adds to his earnings, so everybody is pleased all around."

As the two men returned to their chairs, Weatherbee thanked his companion.

"But," he added, "I hope things are going to change so that none of us will have to go on trying to kill time. I know it looks now as if the jail is filling up instead of emptying, but still we can't tell. Of course, they're going to leave me here—that is, if they don't do anything worse. If I'm left with you, well, two of us ought to be able to do more than one man working alone."

"Even if you can't help us," Houghton added, "you'll cheer us mightily, and give us new things to talk about and think about. Society's what we need more than anything else."

He smiled. Weatherbee held out his hand.

"Please believe that I'm what I say I am," he begged. "Why, a man would be a devil that could come here and pretend friendship for you two when he was an enemy!"

As the two men shook hands, the girl spoke across to Weatherbee with increased earnestness.

"I do believe you," she asserted. "And do you know, for the last few days I've felt as if something was about to happen? I told Will so—didn't I, Will? I felt sure some one was coming. Does that sound strange to you? Shut away like this, somehow I think we get to be sensitive to things—take on a sort of new sense, get the keenness of an animal. I can't explain just what I mean."

"These last two days," added Houghton, "that girl has been like a tigress, pacing, pacing along her wire netting. 'Somebody's coming!' she has said over and over. Well, Ellice, you were right!"

She nodded.

"I have a new hope," she said huskily. "I feel you'll get us out of this. I believe you're an answer to prayer."

"That reminds me of our program," Houghton went on. "We observed one day a week as Sunday, and for two reasons. It would comfort us both to turn our thoughts away from our troubles to something better; also, it would mean a complete change from week days. On Sunday we have studied our Bible, have had special music, and by turns have reviewed all the sermons we've ever heard. Not that I've heard such a lot of 'em, but, as a clergyman's daughter, Miss Loring has."

"Wouldn't it sound strange to Thaddeus Stone," observed the girl, "if I were to tell him that, when I leave this ship, I shall go out of it a better woman? Hard as it has been, I can say truly that if I die here, I'll die better—if I live, I'll live better."

"Sometimes," observed Houghton, "I've almost thought that I needed just this sort of experience."

"No!" she contradicted.

"I mean it," he asserted earnestly. "These fourteen months here haven't been all punishment. For one thing, I've had a chance to do some quiet thinking about a wide range of subjects. Since my college days, I've been a hard-driven man, with never an hour to call my own. Here I've been able to meditate, to ponder a lot of things. You might say that I've got acquainted with myself."

"And what I've learned!" exclaimed the girl. "All my life, with father and mother, and being an only child, I had known just love and tenderness. They did my thinking for me. Well, this place has taught me how to think for myself. When I came into this swamp, I was really a baby, mentally. Now I'm a woman."

"You are indeed!" declared Houghton. "You're brave and wonderful! Why, the dark fits don't come once in a blue moon now. That's what I call spirit!"

Even in that dim light Weatherbee was able to see that Houghton's praise had moved her strongly. The tears were racing down her cheeks once more; but her head was up, proudly and almost defiantly, and she was smiling.

"I've come to look at what's happened in the right way," Houghton continued. "I've worked out a sort of philosophy about all this. I knew I hadn't done one thing that should have given Stone a reason for either hating or fearing me. He had made his troubles out of whole cloth. Being unbalanced, and prone to jump to conclusions, it was a dead certainty that, at some time or another, he would strike at his wife. In that case, then, wasn't it fortunate, I said to myself, that when he went mad he selected me as the other victim? Suppose he had selected a man who, having been shut up here, wouldn't have tried to help her, or would have treated her badly, and not given her the right kind of companionship?"

"You've been a big brother to me," she told him.

"I thank God I've been allowed to share your imprisonment," he replied.

Then, for a little while, no one spoke. The yellow flames of the two lamps were motionless. They lighted three bowed heads. About the three was a profound silence.

Weatherbee was the first to break it.

"Give us some music, Miss Loring," he begged.

Smiling again, she assented. As she rose, the two men rose also—as if they were not in that strange prison, but in a drawing-room; and they stood until she was once more seated.

"Pick out something jolly," suggested Houghton.

Valiantly she began to play one lively tune after another. Weatherbee felt his heart swell at the spectacle of her absolute bravery, and found himself whole-heartedly admiring this cruelly imprisoned girl. He told himself that any man could find it easy to adore her.

"If I'd been here all this time with her," he thought, "I know I'd be heels over head in love with her!"

Watching her, and listening, it struck him as strange that music was allowed. If Markin was so careful in the matter of lights that he had the ports painted over, why was he not anxious on the score of having the piano overheard from the river?

When, during a pause, he mentioned the matter to Houghton, the latter shrugged.

"We've been ordered to keep quiet a time or two," he answered. "Markin doesn't care about to-night, for the reason that, in the first place, the Lillebonne's probably a long way out, and, in the second, she's a Stone boat, and so what's the odds if her native crew do hear? They'll think it's shore natives, or a devil of the night loose in the mangroves."

The piano had changed to some of the lighter classics. Afterward, the girl chose old melodies familiar to them all.

"Won't you sing, Miss Loring?" Weatherbee asked.

She sang, in a low and beautiful contralto. Her voice carried Weatherbee out of himself, so that he forgot he was a prisoner, buried and perhaps lost in a rotting ship in the midst of a Borneo jungle. He even forgot that in the next few hours his life might be in danger. Her song bore him hundreds of miles to a California home set in a pleasant orchard. There a mother, a father, and sisters must even now be wondering where was their wanderer.

The voice of the singer wavered, broke, and stilled. Once more, for a little while, there was silence.

It was then, while the two men sat, not speaking, and not moving, and yet under the spell of the simple and familiar melodies, and the girl leaned over the keys, her back to them, her dark head bent, that all heard, from the deck above, a peculiar loud, grating noise.

All rose, and stood looking at one another. What that noise meant, each knew. Out on the foredeck of the Tai-Lan, the sea ladder was being dragged across the iron deck plates.

"Blodgett!" said Houghton hopefully.

Weatherbee shrugged.

"Or is it my friend Noakes?"

The girl fixed those black, burning eyes on him.

"When they come," she said, keeping her voice low, "if you find you must protect yourself, don't hold back and spare anybody in order to save my feelings. You understand. I told you I sensed things. Well, I do. There's trouble ahead; but I can bear to see it. Yes, after what I've gone through, I welcome it!"

(To be continued in the January number of MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE*)*

CHRISTMAS GARLANDS

WHEN Gregory sent St. Augustine
To Saxon England long ago,
He bade him take the ivy green,
The holly with its emerald sheen,
And sprays of Druid mistletoe
From ancient rites, and thus make gay
Christ's altars on His natal day.

These gleaming garlands still we twine
That link us with the pagan days—
The leaf, the berry, and the vine
That mantled many a marble shrine—
While we lift pæan, prayer, and praise
To Him who once drew mortal breath
Upon the hills of Nazareth.

Clinton Scollard

The Guess Hog

A FEUD OF THE NEW ENGLAND COAST, AND ITS ENDING

By Mary Imlay Taylor

CAPTAIN JARROD LOVE passed the life-saving station four times daily—not from necessity, for the other road was the shortest; but it was a habit stronger than drink. He had been captain—captain is a courtesy title; officially it is warrant boatswain—before his injury.

The day they retired him on a pension was a bitter, black day for Jarrod, who had been on his back in the hospital for six weeks. When he came home at last, Jabish Doane had stepped into his shoes. There were new men and a new lifeboat!

"New broom!" growled Captain Love, though Jabish was an old friend, thirty years in the service.

Jabish was standing outside the station, smoking his pipe, with Ellers, one of the new guards, beside him. Captain Love stared at them ferociously. His eye bulged like a boiled crab's, and a heat wave suddenly seemed to submerge the smokers. Captain Doane took off his cap and mopped his forehead.

"Clearin' weather," he remarked affably. "Good day for a catch, cap."

Captain Love shifted the plug in his cheek and looked askance at the sky.

"Kind o' copperish down to the sou'west. Like to be squally, I'm thinkin'."

Doane squinted around at the southwest.

"Might be," he admitted.

Captain Love started away. Then, as if he felt eyes boring into his back, he spoke over his shoulder.

"Where's Joe, Jabish?"

"Gettin' bait. We're goin' fishin'."

Love grunted and went on, walking with one knee stiff. He was a short, thickset man with a face as salt-seamed as the last piece of corned beef in the brine vat.

The two men left behind stared after him, ruminating, with the far look in their level eyes that comes to the watchers of the sea. The twang of salt came to their nostrils pungent with the odor of fish, the life-saving station and the fish market being near neighbors.

"That game leg of Jarrod's is gettin' mighty stiff," Doane observed. "Notice how he walks, Ellers?"

"Yep. Along of the guess hog, ain't it?"

Doane nodded, and they stared again, dumbly, unblinkingly, after the captain.

"I never had the rights of that yarn," Ellers said at last. "'Bout the guess hog, I mean."

"You ain't been here long!" Jabish grinned reminiscently. "It happened a spell back—war time. Old Porter Johns was captain here till he got so fat they had to lay him off an' put Love in his place. Port took to raisin' pigs. Come along toward Thanksgivin', an' he raised a guess hog. You guess how much the hog weighs, an' you pay a dollar a guess. I've seen as many as five hundred people payin' a dollar apiece on a guess hog. Sure, I have! Ain't much for a whole pig if you win, is it? No, I guess not. Get a whole hog—five hundred pounds, maybe more—for a dollar!

"Port's hog was something tremendous—the finest guess hog you ever see. Some folks thought it weighed seven hundred pounds. Come near the time for the guessin', an' somehow that darned hog got loose in Jarrod Love's garden. Jarrod an' Port lived right alongside. Say, it rooted up all his late cabbages an' some parsnips he'd left to sweeten with frost. He was terrible set on parsnips, Love was. He was so allfired mad, he takes a boat hook—one of them old-fashioned ones with a long wooden handle and an iron hook on it — an' he kills that hog right there, on the spot. Port seen him doin' it, an' ran out with his shotgun an' lets off into Love's leg. He's got a load of buckshot right behind his knee.

"Gosh! Love swore he'd have the law

on Port Johns, but Port took his daughter, Letty, an' sailed away on the Letty Ann. That was his ship. She'd been down to Bermuda, loadin' with onions an' such like, an' she'd been lyin' outside the breakwater, with her crew on her, for a week. Love, he was up to the hospital with a game leg, swearin' out warrants for old Port a heap faster than the doctors could pick out the buckshot, an' Joe, his son, was off his head about Letty Johns. Letty was sweet an' spicy, like a garden pink, an' she an' Joe had been keepin' company quite a spell; but she went off without so much as a word. Her father said he'd be damned if he'd let her marry the son of the man who'd killed his guess hog. Jarrod, he swore he'd get Port jailed soon as he came back; but the Letty Ann ain't never come back."

"S'pose a submarine got her?"

"Dunno. She ain't never been seen, an' it's five years. They found her dory, bottom side up, off Nantucket. The submarine most likely caught 'em just off the roads."

"Seems like old Port Johns got the best of Jarrod, though, don't it?" Ellers emitted this remark slowly, with the smoke of his old brier. "That boy of Love's ain't worth his salt since, is he?"

Captain Doane spat thoughtfully.

"Joe? He's conversable now. Ain't violent, like he was when the Letty Ann went off, but he's always havin' dreams. Ain't you heard the kids yellin' 'Joseph's dreams' after him? He's dreamin' 'bout Letty Johns. His ma often gets up in the night, so she told my wife, to stop him hollerin'. He's always sure Letty's drownin', an' he can't get no clothes on to go an' pull her out."

Ellers chuckled.

"Nightmare! All along of a guess hog, too!"

The two men looked around at each other and laughed a dry, mirthless laugh. Then their eyes turned to the road again. Captain Love was coming back, stiff-kneed as ever.

"Say, Jabish!" he hailed Captain Doane. "You come up to the house. Martha's got a pot of lobster soup. Prime, I'll say it is. You can go off from the pier with Joe afterwards."

Jabish demurred.

"I dunno—my wife's lookin' for me."

But that lobster soup was famous. He put his pipe in his pocket.

"I'll come," he said, and fell in beside the lame captain.

It was Jarrod's third trip past the station. He squinted up at the tower.

"You'll need to watch out sharp tonight," he grumbled. "September weather, Jabish, kind o' squally. Time for gales from Nova Scotia way."

Captain Doane nodded. He was accustomed to advice from his predecessor. They were climbing the hill to Love's house, past Porter Johns's deserted pig pen. The sea was blue as a baby's eyes, but a purple haze hung off in the northeast, hiding the rim of the world. It was a hot day. Not a leaf stirred, and the beach grass was turning yellow. The two old sea dogs trudged up the road in silence.

II

Captain Jarrod was late, and Mrs. Love was dishing the famous soup. She had only a nod for the two men when they came stamping in and sat down at the table. There was an aroma of boiled lobster, hot milk, and onions.

Jabish Doane relaxed in his chair, but Captain Love sat with humped shoulders, and with a sullen look in his bulging eyes. Mrs. Love set a plate of steaming soup in front of the guest, but she looked at her husband.

"Where's Joe?" she asked anxiously.

"He's down to the wharf, gettin' bait, ma'am," replied Captain Doane. "We're goin' fishin'. Most likely he's comin' up the hill now."

"Mackerel runnin' fine, ain't they?" Love asked, not noticing his wife's face.

She set his dish of soup before him, and then she looked from him to Jabish Doane.

"Joe's havin' 'em again," she said.

Doane knew she meant dreams, not mackerel, and her husband knew it, too, but he spooned up his hot soup and blew on it.

"Dreams?" He frowned at her. "Got 'em ag'in, has he?"

She nodded, a lump in her throat.

"Gol-darn Porter Johns an' his gal an' his guess hog!" Captain Love swore under his breath. "Gol-darn 'em to the gol-darn place—"

Mrs. Love clapped her hand over his mouth.

"Sh! Joe's comin'," she whispered.

Her husband pulled her hand from his mouth and swallowed his hot soup, spluttering, his crab eyes popping at her; but she did not look at him. Her eyes were fixed on the door.

Her son came in slowly, hung his cap on the peg, and washed his hands at the sink. The cat began rubbing her back against his legs, and purring.

The young man's face was pale under its tan, and he had the vacant eye, the thin, sensitive lips, of the dreamer of dreams. His dark flannel shirt was open at the neck, and showed a sharp line where the bronze of the weather stopped.

He sat down absently, without speaking, and began to crumb bread into his soup. He did it mechanically, his eyes fixed vacantly on the glimpse of the sea through the open door. He could see the surf breaking high on Lighthouse Point. Joe stared at it and crumbed bread, eating nothing. No one spoke, and there was no sound but the scraping of Captain Doane's spoon.

Suddenly Jarrod Love began to pound on the table with his knife.

"Ain't you got a tongue in your head?" he shouted. "What ails ye, Joe Love? You're makin' a mess out o' your soup that a hog wouldn't eat!"

Joe stared down at his plate and laughed foolishly.

"Looks like it 'd fat a guess hog," he said.

His father banged his fist on the table with a force that made the glasses spin.

"Don't you talk of that damned guess hog to me!" he howled. "I've got enough of him under my knee, gol-darn it!"

Joe pushed his chair back and picked up the cat, rubbing it against his cheek, his feverish gaze fixed on Captain Doane.

"I dreamed of the Letty Ann last night," he said in a low, strange voice. "I saw her plain, with her sails clewed up, beatin' against the storm. They'd put a new coat of paint on her hull, but 'twas the Letty Ann!"

Something about him, standing there, with the cat in his arms, kept them all still. His father stared at him, red in the face. Mrs. Love stopped dishing the herring.

"I saw her plain. She was coming to port," said Joe slowly, dreamily, like a man half dazed.

Then he turned, still holding the cat, and went out.

Jabish Doane nearly choked himself, swallowing bread, pretending not to see how things stood, but Captain Love was staring after his only son, his mouth hanging open. Then, after a moment, he let his two big fists strike on the table and swore. He swore eloquently. He sent old Porter Johns to a hotter place than Davy Jones's locker.

"Gol-darn him!" he roared. "Gol-darn him an' his gol-darned hog an' his gal!"

Mrs. Love said nothing at all. She set her mouth hard, and helped Doane to the rest of his dinner.

Nobody answering back, the captain tired of his profanity, and began to finish his dinner with a different kind of violence. He had to, for Mrs. Love was clearing the table. There was a terrible calm about her, but Doane noticed that her hands shook.

The foghorn began to groan, and he spoke up, thankful for the interruption.

"Dirty weather off shore, I reckon!"

Love nodded, and the two men pushed their chairs back. Mrs. Love was out in the kitchen.

"Marthy!" her husband shouted. "I guess I'll take another cup of tea before I start."

She made no reply, and suddenly there was a terrible pounding and crashing out there. It was the sound of a hatchet on hard wood—crack, crash, bang!

Love got up and went to the door, with Doane close at his heels. He had no business there, but the pounding had fairly knocked him out of his chair.

Mrs. Love stood on the stone step of the back door, with an old boat hook under foot and a hatchet in her hand.

"Here you, Martha Jane, what you doin' with my boat hook, hey?" her husband bellowed.

She turned and stared at him, white and set.

"I'm finishing it, Jarrod Love," she broke out. "Ain't you done enough with it? You killed old Port's guess hog with it, because he rooted up your parsnips, an' you broke your own boy's heart. Ain't that enough for you? Ain't you eaten temper enough? You give me back my boy like he was five years ago, an' I'll put your old boat hook together again!"

The captain was dumb. He stared at her, transfixed. After thirty years of matrimony the worm had turned.

Doane tiptoed back and got his cap. He thought it about time to be going, and he was halfway down the hill to the boathouse when he heard old Jarrod's stiff leg behind him. He could still hear Mrs. Love chopping, as if she wanted to chop Jarrod's head off.

"Gol-darn—" Love started.

The chopping behind them stopped him. He swallowed hard and stumped along, dumb as a clam.

III

THE wind had changed, and there was a fog outside, but Doane had a stanch little boat, and he knew that fish were plenty. It was seldom he got a chance to go, and he was a fisherman born.

Joe was in the boat when they got there, and Captain Love stood, squinting an eye at the sky, while they put off.

"Better come in before dark!" he shouted after them, but the wind tore the words out of his mouth, and Doane only caught something more about dreams.

Joe said nothing. He helped to raise the sail, and the little boat danced off, caught by the wind and tide. The fishing was good, but it turned out bad weather, and Doane put back long before dusk. He had been watching Joe, and he had the remembrance of Jarrod Love's red face and his acrid tongue.

As they landed, Jabish put a kindly hand on the young fellow's shoulder.

"Come to supper up to my house, an' sleep there, too, if you've a mind to," he said.

Joe looked up at him, still befogged.

"Don't you hear it, cap?" he asked in his strange voice. "Don't you hear something out on the rocks?"

Doane listened.

"I don't hear a darned thing but the foghorn, Joe."

"It's terrible thick, ain't it?" Joe stood gaping at the fog. "'Twas like that in my dream—terrible thick an' white!"

Doane got him by the arm.

"Come along," he urged good-naturedly. "My wife's got to cook some mackerel for supper. You'll make us late, Joe!"

Joe yielded, unheedingly, but he ate some of the mackerel. He was hungry, for he had had no dinner. Besides, Mrs. Doane coaxed him. She had a soft spot for the befuddled boy.

She was washing dishes when the captain told her that he had asked Joe to stay all night.

"There's a row up there 'bout Port Johns an' that guess hog," he whispered.

She nodded, looking over her shoulder at Joe, who was still sitting at the table and staring in front of him.

"He's goin' to have dreams to-night," she said. "He's kind o' feverish. I believe I'll get him to bed. Maybe he'll sleep it off."

She coaxed him up to the room in the attic, and gave him a dose of herb tea.

"It's the hot weather in your blood, Joe," she said soothingly, in her motherly way. "Now you lie right down an' sleep it off."

"He's asleep," she said triumphantly, when she came down; "but land sakes, Jabish, the wind's terrible. It's enough to wake the dead!"

It was suddenly howling about the old house—an on-shore gale. Doane was putting on his oilskins when there came a knock at the door. It was Mrs. Love, with a shawl over her head, her round face like a white moon in the fog.

"Where's Joe?" she whispered, looking in at the two in the kitchen.

Mrs. Doane went to her.

"Don't you take on, Martha. Joe's asleep in the attic."

His mother began to cry.

"If it hadn't been for that guess hog!" she sobbed. "Jarrod's fierce to-night," she went on. "He says if ever Port comes back from the dead, he'll have him jailed. A night like this, his leg pains something terrible," she added, half apologetic for Jarrod's long-held anger. Then she drew her shawl close. "I've got to go back, 'Lizabeth, but you'll take care of my boy?"

Elizabeth kissed her silently, understandingly. The two women clung together for a moment, and then Mrs. Love ran off into the fog.

It was about half past eight when Captain Doane reached the station. The first beach patrol had come in at eight, and the second had gone out. All was quiet except the howling storm. Ellers, watching it from the station door, looked around at the captain.

"There'll be something doin' to-night, I'm thinkin', an'—my God, what's that?" he shrieked out, his eyes popping. "What's that, captain, over yonder—see?"

Doane wheeled quickly.

"Gosh!" he said, and half laughed. "It ain't a spook, Ellers—it's Joe Love in one of my old nightshirts, an'—yep, he's sleepwalkin', sure!"

As he spoke, a singular long figure in an old white nightshirt glided nearer, emerging from the thick folds of the fog. Joe's eyes were wide open, but vacant and unseeing. As he came nearer and nearer, as if he felt their presence, once or twice he stretched out thin, beckoning hands.

"Gee!" gasped Ellers, dodging.

Joe came closer, whispering to them.

"I hear her—I hear her! She's on Castlehead Reef—she's callin' me!"

He swung his long arms wide. Captain Doane's wet shirt, three sizes too large, whipped about his long, thin legs. The men were gathering around him, some of them laughing, but Captain Doane silenced them fiercely. Suddenly Joe shrieked aloud.

"She's callin' me! She's out there, drownin'—with my white kitten, the kitten I gave her, in her arms! I see her— Letty, Letty!"

He plunged out, headlong, straight for the surf. Doane and Ellers ran after him, and Ellers got him just as his feet struck cold water. The shock awakened him, and he came back with them, lamblike.

"Where'd I come from?" he asked.

He looked down at Doane's nightshirt, and blushed like a girl. The men guffawed then, but they stopped when he let off another frantic yell.

"I can't stay here!" he cried. "It's my dream hauntin' me!"

Doane thought to humor him.

"What's your dream, Joe?" he asked, shaking his head warningly at the others.

Joe came closer, leaning toward the captain, a weird, dripping figure in a flapping shirt. His eyes were fixed and vacant, and the wind blew his dark hair down on his forehead.

"I dreamed of the Letty Ann," he whispered hoarsely. "I saw her plain—in a storm like this. She drove on the rocks off the head—drove right on 'em! I saw Captain Johns an' Earl Peters—you know, him that was mate—an' Letty. Letty was callin' me to save her. She had the little white kitten I gave her right in her arms, an' she called me: 'Joe, Joe Love, come save me!' I heard her plain. I hear her now. Listen — there it is! 'Joe, Joe!' She's callin' me!"

"Well, I'm beat," said Doane blankly. "Joe, you're pixilated."

"I'm not!" the young man cried wildly. "I tell you she's callin' me—callin' me now!"

He was delirious for the moment, but Doane got hold of him, wrapped him up in an old coat, and sent Ellers home with him.

"You tell my wife to lock him in," Doane whispered.

Ellers nodded understandingly. The captain hushed a laugh here and there among the coast guards, as the two went off together.

"Nothing to laugh at, boys. Bughouse, poor lad, for the love of a pretty girl!"

The storm was growing in fury. It rocked the little station, and lashed itself upon the rocks. It blew close to ninety miles an hour before dawn—an on-shore gale, too. They saw nothing from their post but the surf.

Captain Love hobbled down and sat with them, out of habit, waiting. It is that way with the sea—you wait, nor do you wait long!

IV

AROUND three o'clock in the morning they heard a far-off boom.

"By Jove, it's a ship's gun!" cried Love.

He jumped up on his stiff leg, like an old hound leashed from the hunt. They listened for a moment intently, holding their breaths. One, two, three!

Ellers, who had come back, began to count.

"She ain't got a wireless," he said. "She's somewheres on the rocks off the outside of the neck, most likely."

The men ran to the door as the wind whipped it open. Suddenly, through the fog curtain, a Coston light flared on the beach away to the right.

"Fiske's heard her—maybe he's sighted her lights!" Captain Doane turned back to shout up to the watch. "Got a phone yet?"

In the uproar of wind and surf they could not hear, but they knew Fiske would report at once. Far off and deep, like a human wail of agony, the ship's gun spoke again. Mabie came down from the tower, in his oilskins, dripping with fog.

"Fiske says she's off Castlehead—on the reef. He's made out her signals."

"My Lord, in this sea!" Doane stood aghast. "We can't make her in the lifeboat—not there!"

"Gol-darn it!" roared Love. "Haul across to the neck and shoot the tackle from Castlehead Rock—that's the only way, if they can get it fast!"

"Aye, if they can," Doane agreed. "It's a mighty bad night, Jarrod," he added, "an' the Causeway must be awash."

He gave his orders swift and straight.

"Get out both boats an' the tackle," he shouted, turning to deliver a message to Mabie for Fiske.

They launched the big boats in surf higher than their heads. Grim work, this, for these fishers of men, and a silence as grim fell on them. The light from the open door of the station shone on their glistening oilskins. Down in the dark of the shore below them, Fiske was burning his Coston lights. Like a speck of flame hope leaped with them into the night—hope for the men on the sinking ship.

Fiercely, silently, gallantly, the crew worked, and the sea laughed its defiance. Captain Doane stood up with his megaphone, and the waves broke on his back and rolled down on the flashing oars in their rowlocks. Captain Love was with them, no man turning him back because of his stiff leg.

The second boat took the surf, and then, suddenly, out of the night, a man leaped into her, dropped to a vacant seat, and snatched an oar. Captain Doane saw the leap, and knew him, but he said nothing. Grimly he wondered why that locked door had not kept its prisoner, for it was Joe Love, half dressed this time, and drenched. Doane saw Ellers throw an oilskin over him, and then the sea leaped up with a shout.

The captain forgot Joe, he forgot old Jarrod, too. He bellowed his orders, and the crew bent to their oars, straining. In the darkness, the sea was white as milk with foam.

Joe Love pulled the bow oar, white-faced, staring. Once or twice his lips moved, but no man in the boat knew what he said—whether he blasphemed God or prayed.

Twice the surf beat them back, twice the boats staggered like drunken men; then they landed, and Doane waded ahead through the breakers. Beaten by the wind, drenched by the rain, they staggered across the neck.

The fog hung low, and through it, like a huge shadow, loomed the wreck, jammed tight on the rocks off the head. The wraith of a ship she looked in the mist, her lights like witch eyes winking at death.

"Bring up your racks, boys!" Jabish shouted through his megaphone. "We'll shoot the tackle off the head. Flash her a signal!"

The men were dragging up their gun. Only Joe Love stood still and stared, his eyes on the phantom ship.

The night was far spent, day was stealing out of the sea like a ghost. They could make the ship out now, lying there on the reef, lifted by one wave, ground down by another, breaking her bottom out.

Suddenly Joe Love's wild shout pierced the air. Deaf with the surf as they were, they heard it.

"It's the Letty Ann!" he screamed. "It's the Letty Ann!"

Doane raised his glasses and stared at the wraith.

"By gosh!" he said. "So it is—come back from Davy Jones's locker! It's the Letty Ann, boys, an' she's jammed on the reef off the head—just as Joe's dream had it, if you'll believe me!" he added under his breath.

Captain Love began to swear. Doane, who was looking his way for an instant, saw his face distorted and working. He had been waiting four years for old Porter Johns!

"Damn him, the old guess hog!" he raved. "Let him come ashore, an' I'll get him! Gol-darn him, I'll get him at last!"

No one answered. The men had just shot the line, and a moment of breathless suspense ensued. Then a shout—it was caught and made fast on the wreck. They saw the line tighten as it was gripped.

Old Love was still shaking his fist and shouting something down at the Letty Ann, but the life-savers were too busy securing their racks to hear what he said. They were so busy that they did not even notice that the breeches buoy was already loaded as they paid out. Joe was going down to the ship!

Captain Love shrieked with rage.

"Gol-darn it, haul the fool back!" he screamed to Doane.

"Gol-darn it yourself!" retorted the captain fiercely. "We're trying to save life!"

But his eyes followed Joe anxiously. Was the boy mad clear through?

The sea was breaking over the Letty Ann when Joe swung aboard. The fog and the spray kept those on shore from seeing her clearly, but, as soon as the signals were set, they hauled in, and pretty Letty Johns herself came up—little Letty, her pink cheeks white, her fair hair wet, and a white cat in her arms.

Captain Doane gasped.

"We'll, I'll be blamed if it ain't Joe's white kitten!"

Letty and the cat were both dripping, but she refused to be sent across to the station for shelter.

"You'll catch cold," Captain Doane argued, fatherly even when at work.

Letty lifted her blue eyes to his.

"My father's out there," she said; "father and Joe! I'm going to stay right here until they're safe!"

She did, too, holding the cat in her arms, and never once looking toward Captain Love, though she could hear him cursing and raving by turns.

V

THERE were five men still aboard the Letty Ann—Captain Johns and Earl Peters, the mate, with two sailors and the cook. Besides, there was Joe Love.

The wind whipped the spray back, and they saw her plainly now, listed to one side, half her deck awash. She was breaking fast, and the life-savers worked hard. It was a time when death comes close, close, out of the sea.

It was broad day and clearing fast when they got the fourth man off, and only the captain and Joe were left aboard. The men were paying out the line, and the breeches buoy was almost there, but the sea had the Letty Ann in its jaws, and suddenly, like that, she split open.

There was a mighty wave, and the spray flew up and fell over her like a bride's veil. Then they saw Captain Johns on one side, and Joe Love in the water, between the two parts of her.

The line held, and the breeches buoy was almost down to Porter Johns. He had only to get hold of it and be saved.

"Joe's gone!" Captain Doane thought bitterly.

Then he heard a girl's scream. It was Letty, and her voice cut the air like a knife.

"Joe!" she shrieked. "Joe!"

It seemed as if he heard her. Doane could see his white face turned up toward the rocks, and he struggled for his life. The sea had him, sucking him out of the hole in the ship, but he caught and clung.

Old Porter had his hand on the breeches buoy. The next wave might sweep the Letty Ann off the rocks—surely he would save himself! But he did not. Old and fat as he was, he started down the sloping deck, gripped a bit of railing, and reached out for Joe.

Another wave broke.

"Lordy, it's close!" Ellers whispered below his breath.

They all thought both men were gone; but Port Johns got Joe by the neck, like a puppy. He slipped and fell, but hung on. He did not get up again, though. The two hung there, Port clinging to the railing, and Joe to Port.

"Some one's got to go down an' help!" Doane shouted.

They hauled the breeches buoy back with frantic haste.

Another wave broke, and they saw nothing but the ship's keel in the surf, but the line held.

"Thank God!" Doane breathed.

As he spoke, Ellers leaped for the breeches buoy — another man to gamble with death!

There was no sound now but the sea. Letty Johns was on her knees, praying, and Captain Love stared at her. He stopped swearing and stood there, frozen to the ground. Joe was all he had. Perhaps he wanted to kill Letty Johns. He must have thought she had cast a spell over his boy; but the men had no time for him. They had to watch their lines. If the wreck broke loose, they would lose Ellers, too.

The wind tore the waves back, and they saw Porter Johns and Joe still clinging, and Ellers trying to reach them. It was like a fearful motion picture, with all the make-believes left out.

They saw Ellers go over the deck, swaying on his sea legs. He reached the two shipwrecked men, but the foam spouted up from the hole in the ship and hid the rest. The next thing they saw was Joe and Ellers dragging old Port Johns, for he could not walk. He had broken his leg saving Joe Love!

The men ashore saw it, and so did Jarrod, but not a word came from him. They hauled the fat old captain up—Ellers and Joe had tied him in the breeches buoy—and laid him down on his back, like an old sea turtle. Except for his daughter, no man had thought for him. They were bent on saving the two left behind.

The mast that held the lines was rocking, and the sea tore out another bit of the Letty Ann, as if the waves were biting off a piece of pie. There was a shout when Joe and Ellers caught the returning breeches buoy and held it. The two clung to it together—their last chance.

The men on the cliff began to haul in carefully and steadily, holding their breath. A sea broke clean over the breeches buoy, and Doane heard Captain Love, not swearing, but praying.

"My son! My only son! Lord, forgive me! Lord, forgive me that damned guess hog! It was trespassin' on my place, anyhow! Lord, he's all I've got! My son! My only son!"

Nobody felt like laughing then—not old Port, lying there, groaning; not Letty, for she was crying; not the men fighting to save life.

"Haul in, damn you!" yelled Captain Doane, frantic as the breeches buoy went under again.

The men hauled valiantly, Fiske risking his life at the top of the cliff to steady the lines. Slowly they came up out of the sea. They got to the edge just as the mast broke and the tackle swung loose; but Doane and Mabie had them, and dragged them up by main force.

Joe stood up, white and smiling and dripping, his eyes shining. There was new life in his long, thin face. The shock had restored his scattered wits.

"My dream!" he cried. "Letty, my dream!"

He held out his shaking arms. She ran into them, cat and all, and no one smiled.

The men had gathered silently, with one accord, about the two ancient enemies. There would be something doing after all these years—but what?

Love was swallowing hard. Old Johns was lying there, swearing with pain, for Mabie was clumsily trying to ease his leg until the doctor could get there.

"Port!" Captain Love spoke sharply, swallowed, and went on hoarsely: "I—I saw you save my boy. I'm—I'm damned sorry I killed your guess hog!"

Old Porter Johns stared up at his enemy for a minute. Then he grinned.

"Jarrod," he said, "your game leg's starboard and mine's port. I reckon we're quits, ain't we?"

Jarrod nodded, still choked up, and neither then nor afterward did he ever mention the guess hog. The feud sank with the Letty Ann.

As for Joe? Captain Doane always smiles slyly when he ends the yarn—he tells it sometimes—and wags his head knowingly.

"Did he quit dreamin'? Sure he did—he got married!"

BEYOND THE DOOR

Twin soul you were to me, my heart's sweet fellow,
  Blending the varied colors of my days
Into one perfect hue, the union mellow
  Of all the prismic rays.

My cheek that knew the hollow of your shoulder,
  That felt the rise and fall of your white breast,
Now cannot tell if night be young or older,
  Knowing not any rest.

The darkling silence fills with poignant yearning,
  My heart cries out across unbounded space;
And from afar, where faithful stars are burning,
  Draws near to me your face.

You were a part of all my spirit's dreaming,
  Gave my thoughts wings and taught them how to soar—
You, who have gone so far, but yet in seeming
  Only beyond the door!

F. L. Montgomery

Silk—and Needs Darning

NOT NADINE BESSINGER, BUT HER MOTHER-IN-LAW, IS THE HEROINE OF THIS STORY

By Veta Griggs

AFTER Jason had telephoned, the old woman bustled about in a maze of happiness. She pretended to find dust where there was none, threw out fresh flowers to make room for fresher ones, put new paper in the cage of Columbus, the canary, and climaxed her absurdities by polishing the isinglass front of the air-tight in the parlor.

When the afternoon was on the wane, she put on her best mourning, full-skirted, with cut jet buttons like small blackberries down the tight front of the basque, and pinned it at the neck with a brooch framing a twist of fair hair. Her scant white locks she combed severely back, and fastened a bow of black velvet ribbon on top, where the pink scalp showed through. Since 1870 she had worn the bow on state occasions, and this was one. Jason was her man child, her only son, and he did not come to see his mother too often.

By this time a street car was due at the bottom of the hill. She hurried down the narrow hall and flung open the front door. The winter sunlight drowned her in gold, and at its glow the canary burst into vibrant ecstasy.

The old woman's heart jerked, and tears were near her lids, as she recognized the agile figure climbing the steep slope below.

Jason waved his hat as he mounted toward the small house that stood, as if on tiptoe, on the hill peak. He thrust open the white picket gate—which always dragged—raced up the walk of tilted cement blocks, where sweet alyssum grew between the cracks, and met a quivering black figure on the threshold.

"Jason! My boy!"

"Hello, muddy!"

They kissed, and the man laughed.

"You've been chewing lavender again!"

"Now, deary," she defended seriously, "you know I like a nibble now and then."

His arm across her shoulders, he led the way back into the house, peering around with sharp blue eyes.

"Nothing changed! There's Columbus, darn his old soul! Muddy, I haven't been here for almost six months. You ought to spank me!"

"You're busy, Jason," she said. "How's Nadine?"

"Oh, all right." His expression changed, then took on a resolute brightness as he seated himself by the stove. "Muddy—got anything to eat?"

"I was waiting for that!"

The old woman trotted into the pantry, came out with a tray, and put it on the table beside her son. Then she sat down in a low, carpet-seated rocker to watch him eat.

There were bread, a glass pitcher of milk, a brown pottery jar, and a plate covered with a fringed napkin. Jason pretended to peep anxiously under the napkin, guessing:

"Cookies? Brown bread? Pumpkin pie! Murder! Say, let me begin with dessert first!"

"Do you remember, son, you used to beg to do that?"

"Yes, and you never did let me. What's in the jar?"

She took off the lid and showed him beans—crisp, a strip of bacon embedded in the brown surface. He spooned a ravenous helping.

"M-m-m, that's bully! Lord, how I hate this delicatessen stuff!"

A sad prescience came into his mother's eyes. She lowered them to her lap.

"The corner delicatessen makes a macaroni salad, slimy with cotton-seed oil and vinegar. We have it whenever Nadine gets in late from the matinée. M-m-m! This pie is great, I'll tell the world! Muddy, where's the old japanned spice box?"

" In the kitchen."

" Same place?"

" Same place."

" How do you do it?"

Her puzzled look forced him to explain.

" I mean, how do you keep the same, year after year? The neighborhood changes, but you and this house don't."

He chuckled, pouring another glass of milk.

" I remember the old days when I was a kid, and the ball games in the vacant lots, and our neighbors. Do you recollect the Tollmeisters? They had a sway-backed mare and an old surrey. Tollmeister drove, but his wife sat on the back seat, and tried to look as if he were her coachman and she suspected he drank."

" I remember."

" And old Bill Butternut! He put up a big windmill that went around like a clock. It wasn't till ten years later that the authorities discovered it was a dummy, attached to the city water pipes. They made him pay back bills for ten years!"

" It was an awful scandal," the old woman said gravely.

" Well, those people were funny, but they had something rare—leisure, time to think. They've all moved away now, if they're still alive—and here you are. The city has drawn away from you. It has sucked me in."

" I'm content here," she said. " Your father built this house when the town was young. He wanted to fill it, small as it is, with children and children's children. He died in the back bedroom. I shall die here, too, some day."

Jason bore down with the side of his fork on the shortened pie crust.

" I don't believe it. I think you will always be here, you and Columbus, for me to come and talk things over with. Why, look here!" he cried. " I suppose at the time father built this house, it couldn't have cost more than two thousand dollars, if that; and it has been a home for forty years! I pay nearly that much a year for the apartment, and what do I own at the year's end? Not a splinter! Not a rusty nail hole! Money poured down a well! Young people now are creatures of a day—they don't build for the future."

" You should," said his mother. " It's in your blood. The Bessingers were always builders."

" That reminds me—"

The crumpled napkin was flung upon the empty tray as he turned to her. The old woman saw that he was now coming to the object of his visit. She folded her veined hands, and rocked gently back and forth in the dusking room.

" I've got the chance to go to Nevada, grow up with a new mining town, and make my pile. It can be done, easy! Look at Goldfield. You have to get in at the beginning, that's all, and grab the enormous amount of construction work in the field. I have the knowledge, and I can get the pull. I'm choked here. This place is at the end of its boom."

" Nevada's a long way off," his mother said, stifling a sigh. " I'll have to get used to the idea. I'll be lonely."

" Don't worry!" The light dying from his face, he kicked the air-tight. " It's not at all probable that I'll go. Nadine says she won't."

II

It was quite dark by this time, save for the red eye of the stove. Mrs. Bessinger rose and lit the student lamp, replacing the white shade with fingers gone suddenly tremulous. The little room glowed. Columbus, seemingly headless, was asleep on his perch.

" Muddy, I suppose you couldn't speak to Nadine?"

" Mother-in-law's advice," the old woman responded dryly, and sat down, smoothing her silk lap. " I will, if you wish; but it would be—easier—if Nadine liked me better."

" Oh, she likes you, all right; only she's one of these people—if you want her to do something, you must tell her not to do it." He went on, looking straight ahead: " There's no doubt about it, in the last year or two Nadine has—deteriorated. She wasn't so much when I married her — a good girl, of course, but a telephone girl, Butch Conner's daughter. I gave her the first good clothes she ever had, and now you ought to hear her talk about ' gowns.' I earn three times what I did when we were married, but we don't get anywhere. Whenever there seems to be a chance of saving something, she beats me to it, and heads me off with some new extravagance.

It keeps my nose to the grindstone all the time!"

He reached over, picked up the poker, and weighed it carefully.

"We American men, we think to take a woman by the hand, walk beside her, and give her the earth. What really happens is that we pack her on our backs till we die. I don't mean your kind, muddy—they are the salt. I mean my own generation. What's the matter with us?" he cried, flinging out his hands. "What's the matter with the young people? Look at the thousands of young couples cooped up in apartments. They can't entertain—there isn't room. They repay social obligations by a dinner or a dance at some swell place, and it costs like the devil. Excuse me, muddy! Hospitality is a lost word. We have no homes."

"Yes—you've said that before," his mother returned.

She was pleased to have him there, with the lamplight on his crisp blond hair and ruddy skin.

"And children," he went on. "In a majority of cases it's not our fault if we don't have children. Plenty of us would like them. Is there a blight on us?"

"Your two grandmothers had eleven," Mrs. Bessinger said. "I had just you."

"Can't be helped, I guess; but extravagance and laziness can. I'll say this for Nadine—she's no worse than the women of her set; only she had less when she was young, so she brags more about what she has now. They all take the easy way out. Why, muddy, we were at the theater the other night, and a fool comedian came out and told us that he was going to sing a song called: 'She Put the Dishes in the Sink'; and nearly every woman in the house burst into a foolish giggle. Their dishes were all in the sink. That's partly why I want to get Nadine away from their influence. I don't know," he added, "why I tell you all this. It's not disloyalty to my wife—it's just because I'm mad and tired. Nadine has turned out so differently from what I expected!"

"She's pretty."

His mother's gaze was fixed on a photograph tacked to the wall paper—a sepia print of white shoulders, soft dark eyes and hair, crinkled lips pouting from a blurred background.

"Yes, she's pretty, if she doesn't force it, if she lets herself alone. Muddy, she goes to the dresser in our dark little bedroom, snaps on the light, and makes up—makes up, mind you, in a night light. Then she goes out into the sunshine, blotched with red and white like a clown, like a chippy, like a—"

"Remember that you're speaking of your wife, son!"

"Believe me, I haven't forgotten it. You should see the apartment. We hire a Jap to go over it once a week. She won't wash even a handkerchief; says there's no place to dry them. Our laundry bills are unbelievable. The place smells of stuffiness and undercooked food and talcum. You can't even find anything in a drawer, they're so pawed over and over. I never sling *my* things about."

"You were always tidy as a boy."

"Much good it does me now! I haven't a whole sock to my name."

He stooped for a second, then lifted to sight a shapely foot, exposed at heel and toes. Mrs. Bessinger shuddered.

"Don't put those on again, Jason. I'll give you a pair that I've just knitted for the Endeavor. I try to do my stint each month. You ought to wear wool in winter, anyhow. Take 'em both off."

"They're typical of the times," he answered, tugging. "Silk—and need darning. A sham, like everything else! Sometimes I think that even love is just a sham nowadays. People don't love as they used to. Well, I must be getting back."

The old woman had stopped rocking. The Bessingers were not a demonstrative race, and she had never babied Jason. Rather, they had talked things over as man to man. This conversation to-night, painful as a confession of his domestic dissatisfaction, was yet the result of adolescent faith, and therefore precious; but she knew that he had stopped just short of the real disclosure.

"Don't say that about love, son. If it is worth anything at the beginning, it will be worth it to the end. Can't you stay here to-night? Do!" she coaxed. "I've had a pair of your pyjamas all done up and waiting for you ever so long; and there's a plate of red apples by the bed, if you get hungry in the night."

"I am dog-tired," Jason admitted. "I'd like to go to bed right now, as if I was a kid!" He rose and came toward her, barefooted, the shoes dangling from one hand. "You phone Nadine and tell her I'm going to stay, will you? She has a fit if I come home late."

His mother promised, giving him the lamp on the plea that she meant to sit by the stove a while longer.

Soon after, she got up and went into the bedroom, to tuck the covers under his chin and lay an extra comforter across the foot of the bed. Then she picked up the lamp and stood over him, her shadow an inked colossus bent across wall and ceiling.

"Thanks, muddy!" His long strength was stretched at ease between the sheets. "Maybe you and I'll elope to Nevada if Nadine won't go. I'd like to try it for a while, anyway. Then let her get her divorce if she wants it!"

"Good night, deary," was all his mother answered.

Shading the flame from his eyes with one curved, pinkly translucent hand, she went out and closed the door.

She found herself trembling. Putting the lamp on the table, she went over and stood at the window, staring down at the linked lightnings in the darkness that indicated the direction of the city. Strata of salt fog, blown from the ocean, drifted across the lights, blurring their sophisticated brightness. It all seemed akin to the distracting mists in her brain.

"Then let her get her divorce if she wants it!"

That could mean but one thing—they had talked it over. Nadine must have threatened, insisted. A divorce—a divorce among the Bessingers! Her own children! No—her own child and the daughter of Butch Conner—a spoiled, underbred girl, who had taken her boy from his mother.

On the whatnot lay her Bible, a volume almost a century old, containing the time-yellowed record of an austere and upright family whose cult was loyalty. She herself was a Bessinger, and she had married a cousin after the Civil War; waiting for him, with the pathetic patience of a Victorian maiden, in her father's house.

There came back as of yesterday, the solemn joy of that marriage hour, the pious resolve to accept whatever hardship might be its fruit. These younger women of today made a different resolve—to escape all responsibility, and at the first sign of hardship to tug and strain at their bonds. Who are they, the old woman asked herself with high scorn, that life must be swept and garnished to their feet? Dust motes in the sunshine, iridescent dragonflies over a pool, skimming the surface, lost if they drop beneath it!

III

Her promise to telephone Nadine recurred to her mind, yet still she waited. At the moment the idea of a daughter-in-law was abhorrent to her. The sleeper beyond the wall was Jason, her little boy, tired from play in the garden; Jason, back from school with a perfect report card; or, having just made a touchdown on the college gridiron, blissfully asleep in arnica and bandages.

Columbus stirred on his perch, and she became aware that the telephone was ringing for the second time. As she took down the receiver, a stern reticence lay in her eyes.

"Hello, mother!" A bright, modulated voice, lacking the hello-girl tang. "Is my husband there?"

"No!" Mrs. Bessinger wondered if it could be herself who uttered that amazing monosyllable in a steady voice.

"No?" There was a perceptible drop in the brightness. "Where can he be, then? It isn't like him to be out so late."

"I presume he's out on business."

"Oh, yes — business! I — I hardly expected him back before midnight, anyway. Sorry to have bothered you!"

"Don't mention it," Mrs. Bessinger answered, and hung up abruptly.

She had spoken throughout in a low voice that would not carry beyond the room. She bent her brows over the lie her subconscious self had framed. Later, on her knees, she would ask pardon of God, but now the human impulse was to excuse the sin. Nadine had been acting up. Very well, let her have time to think it over! Let her worry a little, and learn that her tantrums could not always bring Jason to time! She was lucky to have a mother-in-law who never interfered or made trouble, and who was not inclined to consult her own interests.

All by herself in the parlor, Mrs. Bessinger blushed to the ears under the shock of a certain thought. She picked up the Bible hastily and sat down, the crisp leaves whispering under nervous fingers. Thought battled with instinct, and she could not focus on the print.

The volume, relaxing, opened at an accustomed page. "Blessed are the peace-makers," read the old woman in a quavering voice.

She shut the book with a snap, and passed, head high, into her bedroom.

In the morning she washed out the ragged silk socks and hung them to dry, the day being foggy, over a chair before the air-tight. After breakfast she had walked to the gate with Jason, who lingered to listen for the hum of his approaching car.

"Good-by, muddy!" He bent, kissing her. "You telephoned Nadine?"

"I talked with her."

"Did she"—he hesitated—"did she want me to come home?"

His mother, looking straight at him, shook her head solemnly.

"Oh, all right!" Scarlet, forgetting that he had not acknowledged an open rupture with his wife, he gave a reckless laugh and shrug. "I'd hate to intrude on a lady! Muddy, can I come back to-night? I'll be back about half past five. Here's my car. Don't you worry about this," he added, catching the expression on the wrinkled face. "You can't help it. In fact, there is nothing you can possibly do. We have to go our own gait."

The last unconscious words had thrust the old woman back on her shelf. Her son felt that there was no fight left in her. She knew that to him her life, her methods, and her rigid religious habits must seem as obsolete as the dodo. Yet once she had held her own in a growing town, had been wife to a prominent citizen and mother of a dependent little boy. Physical infirmity is not the most painful phase of passing years.

Alone in the living room, she looked up wistfully at a crayon portrait of Thomas Bessinger, which dominated the south wall in its red plush frame.

A square, straight-browed face, set in whiskers raying outward like the petals of a sunflower—so he had looked at the time of his death. In her depression there came a sinful doubt. If they met in heaven, would he recognize and still love her shrunken body and slack face?

But there was no marrying in heaven. Perhaps that was a divine dispensation to render doubly precious love and marriage on earth. Yet there were fools who would jeopardize such happiness for a caprice. Jason had married one of them.

As she sat there, isolated from all that meant so much to her, again came the pang of emptiness to which she had waked on the morning after the boy's wedding, the realization that she was alone in the house—to be alone, perhaps, till carried feet first out of the front door and across the tilting cement blocks and the sweet alyssum.

The women of her generation met a divided fate. Some—respectable old women, too—in panic fear of being left behind, deserted by kin and children, dyed, painted, squeezed protesting flesh into tight corsets and shoes, and trotted out upon the track again, stoically hiding groans of torture in their own rooms. Opposed to these were quaint, scented souls who had long since given up the race, and who sat retired in shawls, withdrawn from the boisterous age.

Mrs. Bessinger saw herself joining these last, becoming one of the unneeded, losing her identity in the shadow of senility—thrust there by a plump, spoiled girl.

It was in a moment of revolt that she had lied to Nadine, and had tied herself down to a course of action totally foreign to her nature. She could have endured to give up Jason if he had been happy, but he was not. The sacrifice had been in vain.

The strain of duplicity showing plainly in mouth and eyes, she went about the household tasks. Morning passed, noon came and went. Mrs. Bessinger's hands rattled the dishes in the pan, and she talked to herself in an agitated mumble, with only Columbus as auditor. She had forgotten to give the bird his bath.

When everything was in order, she took her knitting and sat down by the living room window to watch for a visitor, who ran hastily up the steps and jerked at the bell as the clock struck three.

IV

INTO the small room, somnolent with tick of clock and purr of flame-wrapped kindling, Nadine made the entrance of the wronged wife in the third act. She offered her mother-in-law a cold cheek and sat down, exhibiting plaintive eyebrows and a saddened mouth, and shaking minute particles of sachet from a handkerchief held ready for action.

She was in shining gray, from furs to spats. Rouge was rubbed to the swollen edges of her eyelids. Nadine's habitual manner indicated that she either was tired, or had been tired, or was about to become tired; and now Mrs. Bessinger ignored these storm symptoms, developing a cheerful garrulity which postponed grievances for the time.

"Do take off your things, deary—or at least loosen your furs. There! Why, you're all out of breath!"

"It's the hill and that wretched climb. I don't see how you stand it. Aren't you tired of being perched away up here, mother? I should think you'd feel so *out* of it!"

"I've got my place and my duty in the world, just the same as any of them down there."

The half resentful gesture indicated the city. Nadine looked at the patient face and black velvet bow with indulgent pity and a healthy young woman's disbelief that she herself can ever grow old.

"Oh, of course! Well, I can't climb. It puts my heart up under my ears. I'm going to make Jason buy me a car—and not a tin Lizzie, either. We can perfectly well afford it. The Lawsons—they live in the apartment next to us—have a new roadster, most attractive; and Hubert Lawson doesn't get near the salary my husband does. I tell Jason he's stingy not to have given me one before this!"

"You must be hungry after your ride," the other evaded.

At that moment she did not care to speak of her son. She brought from the pantry a thick slice of chocolate cake, on one of the octagonal saucers that were a Bessinger heirloom.

"How nice that looks!" Nadine's small hands struggled eagerly from their gloves. "You always feed people, don't you, mother? O-o-oh! Honestly, that's the best cake I ever ate! I get so tired of the delicatessen cake."

"I have the recipe," Mrs. Bessinger said.

There was a palpable pause.

"Thanks—some other time," the visitor murmured. She picked up a crumb on her forefinger and ate it. "Silly of me to call you out of bed last night!"

"I wasn't in bed."

"It's the first time Jason ever played me that trick — staying out all night, I mean." She swallowed rapidly, fanning her beaded lashes. "Do you know, he's not back yet!"

"I suppose his business—"

"Oh, yes—business! Just the same, he ought to have phoned me, don't you think?"

"Yes, I reckon so."

"Of course I worried all night. I expected him at breakfast, and waited lunch for him. If he'd been hurt, I'd have heard. It may be he is trying to pay me back because—" Here the wronged wife remembered her rôle. "Oh, you might as well know it! We had a squabble yesterday morning, and I had to assert myself. He wants me to go with him to a place in Nevada—it can't be called a town, because there's only one store and a post office and some dirty mines there now. I told him flatly, no!"

Nadine hated her mother-in-law's reticence. It drove you into too much explanation, into saying things you regretted afterward.

"I *won't* get up with the mercury below zero," she went on, "and carry wood and build fires and break ice for water. It's too much! A man who wants a woman to do that for him doesn't love her. I told him so, and he said I exaggerated the hardships, but he can't fool me. I told him I wouldn't budge from my nice, warm apartment—I'd leave him first!"

Old Mrs. Bessinger lifted the top of the air-tight and laid another stick on the coals. The upward glow reddened her inscrutable countenance.

"Men are all selfish," Nadine went on pettishly. "They don't know how much work a woman has to do, even in an apartment. Sometimes at night I'm so tired I can hardly stand." She caught her breath, the black lashes wide with joyous relief. "Mother! Are those his socks? Then he's been here!"

"He left those the last time he was here," the other said distinctly. "I offered to darn them for him. They're in pretty bad shape."

Nadine sank back in her chair.

"You think"—with a quivering chin—"that I neglect him because those aren't mended. It's no use to spend time on the flimsy things; they only pull away from the darns. Everything is so shoddy nowadays! I'm sick of it all, the housework, and the slavery, and snobbish women, and no chance to assert myself! Don't sit there without a sound! I'd rather you'd say it! I know you don't approve of me. Of course you'd take his part!"

Mrs. Bessinger hesitated for a moment. She seemed to be choosing her words, perhaps her course of action.

"Not at all. Jason was an only child. It's natural for him to be selfish."

"He's no worse than other men," Nadine answered instantly.

"And I taught him to be close with his money."

"But he isn't! He gives me plenty!"

"That's good. Sometimes men stint their wives because there's some other woman."

"Mother! My Heavens, you don't really think that? He never looks at anybody but me. The men in the office call him Old Faithful. You can't really think so?"

"No, I don't. Jason isn't like that. He has no respect for love that's not legal, any more than he has respect for business methods that aren't legal. If he has left you for good"—the girl winced—"it's because he's sick of all women. Jason's sensitive, but he's just. He may come back to you yet."

"I haven't said he wouldn't, have I?"

"No, but you may have said something he couldn't forgive. I only thought, since you say you have endured so much from him, that it might be a relief if he didn't come back. I thought that in that case it would make your divorce easier."

"Divorce!" Her daughter-in-law's voice rose to a wail. "What for?"

"Desertion."

"Why, Mother Bessinger! I don't want a divorce!"

"Excuse me! I'm getting a little deaf. I thought you said just now you would leave him if—"

"Oh, I *said!* I say lots of things I don't mean. We all do."

"Well, I don't know that I ever threatened to leave my husband because he had a chance to make some money. He might have taken me at my word. Besides, I always figured that my place was beside him; but I suppose that's an old-fashioned idea."

The speech seemed sincere, the manner was hesitant and altogether guileless, but Nadine, kicking her patent-leather heels against the rug, made no reply for some moments. With the unreasonable pride of one in the wrong, she was ready, if opposed, to fight furiously for her point of view. Knowing the old woman's partiality for Jason, she had come there to get news of him, as well as sympathy. What she found confused and disturbed her. There was no naming it. She began to fear lest the quarrel with her husband might have more serious results than she had imagined.

"I'd like to know," thought the laboring brain under her glossy waves, "what your game is, old lady! You never liked me. Are you trying to separate us?" Aloud she said: "I thought you didn't approve of divorce."

Again Mrs. Bessinger seemed to study, again to decide.

"A woman of my age has a chance to change her mind a good many times; and why not? The whole of creation is changing every day. Yes, I used to think divorce a crime, a shame, a deadly sin—an excuse of fly-by-night creatures who couldn't stick to anything. They promised everything and performed nothing."

Here the old woman glanced up at the clock. It seemed to her that the hands were spinning like the spokes of a wheel. She set her jaws and went on:

"Once I'd have prayed on my bended knees to keep such a disgrace from the family. I'd never have got over it; but now I can see how in some ways it might be a relief. It gives folks another chance. Take Jason, for instance. He's young, and, if I do say it, good-looking. 'Tisn't likely he'll stay single long. Won't you have another piece of cake, deary?"

"No, thanks!"

Pale to the lips as suspicion crystallized into certainty, as she realized the combination formed against her, Nadine huddled in the big chair. In the rage of the day before, had she given Jason any loophole of escape? *Did he want to escape?* Had she made him so unhappy that he would take advantage of her nagging? There was no telling how he would react.

Dizzy with the unaccustomed strain, she shut her hot eyes, but could see only a darkness lit with sparks.

Her mother-in-law got up noiselessly and took the empty saucer back into the pantry. Action was a relief, but for a moment, in the cool, dark place, she clasped her hands and looked up with dim eyes that yet saw beyond the roof and the fog and past the stars themselves, invisible in heaven.

She came out with the uplifted gaze of one emerging from church, and again took her low rocker by the window. The clock was striking half past five, and a street car had just stopped at the foot of the hill. Mrs. Bessinger watched absorbedly for a moment as a passenger swung from the car and began the climb. Then she turned, and, with a crooked smile at the worried figure across the room, gave another turn to the screw.

"Of course, whatever happens, I hope you'll remember that you were once my daughter. I don't chop and change like some. I'll always be real glad to have you stop in and visit me, just as you have in the past."

There Nadine stopped her. In the last two hours she had passed through all the phases of emotion that her nature could endure. She had the look of one waking with a thud from a nightmare as she jerked from her chair, and, catching up the socks, hugged them defiantly to her breast.

"If anybody's to darn these, it 'll be me!"

She meant to make her exit with dignity, but at the last moment she broke. She gave a cry between a scream and a bleat, and tears leaped through the beaded lashes and streaked down her rouge. Momentarily she lacked the polish of the wronged wife, but she was infinitely more convincing, as she shook a bare hand at her mother-in-law, gasping:

"I'll tell you one thing right now, and you can put it in your pipe and smoke it! Jason's my husband—all mine! If I want to fight with him, that's my business. If I don't want to, you can't make me, no matter how hard you try!"

Here she found her handkerchief, and used it. "There's no sense in talking about a divorce. There'll be none in this family. If I want to follow Jason to the north pole, nobody can stop me. If I want to go to Nevada with him, I'm going! I'll find him right now and tell him so. I'm g-going to hunt till I f-find him!"

"All right, deary!" Mrs. Bessinger had also risen. "You just go down the hall and open the front door."

She stood for a moment in the wind that swept through the opening, her lungs warmed with distillations of wave-beaten kelp and salt, her old ears still hearing the last stormy sob that had burst from an overcharged heart.

There was a luminous glow of triumph on her wrinkles. Out of it, sitting alone on the hilltop, hers was the victory. Selfishness and extravagance, twin discords in domestic harmony, are powerless when the keynote sounds love.

Across the white gate a man and woman kissed, trembling. Mrs. Bessinger shut the door.

"There! Sing your best, Columbus!" she said. "I guess those children can get along without help for a while now!"

A LOVER'S GEOGRAPHY

'Tis strange to think a year ago
I had not seen your face;
And now the world is nought but you,
And there's no other place
In all the mapped terrestrial sphere
Except the place where you abide;
For you have blotted time and space,
And when, belovèd, you are here,
There is no universe beside!
Just where your two feet stand
Is all there is of land—
An island in an empty sea,
With gulfs of nothing ringed around;
For you are my geography,
Our love the only solid ground.

What more of earth should I desire?
If other land there really be,
Let it to other men belong;
For here is land enough for me—
Just room enough to grow a rose,
Just room enough to hold you close,
Room enough for a song!

R. Merton Hall

The Country Mouse

THROWING A SIDE LIGHT ON THE EMANCIPATION OF THE MODERN GIRL

By Ethel M. Kelley

"YOU had better put down that cigarette, Claire. Your father and your cousin are here." Anna Emory turned away from the window, where she had been looking down from her fifth-story elevation to the tangle of Broadway traffic, out of which a single taxi had emerged to turn the corner of her cross street. "I don't know where we'll put all those hat boxes, and I suppose there are trunks—"

"She'll have two, all full of starched muslin stuffed with tissue paper, and nifty little sport clothes," Claire predicted. "She'll expect to sally forth on Fifth Avenue in a different sweater every morning. But you needn't think I'm going to stop smoking, mother, just because my country cousin is landing. I am going to need all the stimulant I can get."

"Claire, Aunt Elizabeth thinks smoking is positively the last symptom of depravity. I practically promised her that Alice shouldn't see any of it in my home. Of course, I don't approve of it myself. I suppose John is on the switchboard, and the elevator has to wait, as usual, until he is free to bring up passengers. Your father hates to be late down town, and he has given up almost an entire morning to meeting Alice."

"He ought to have let me go for her."

"He thinks it's a man's duty to hang around railroad stations, not a woman's."

"Well, he's a dear old egg! I only hope Alice is going to be worth it. I suppose she's just one of those regular demihicks."

Claire began to sing, waving her cigarette to mark the rhythm.

"Said the highbrow to the hick:
'Ain't it laid on pretty thick?'
Said the hick unto the highbrow:
'Say, there ain't no flies on my brow!'"

There was a sound from the outer hall.

"Ah, the elevator at last!" cried Claire. "No, mother, I won't put out my cigarette. She can take me or leave me, as I am."

"Well, I suppose you will do what you please." Anna Emory turned large blue eyes—not, however, without their glint of humor—rather pathetically on her daughter. It was merely her maternal attitude that was traditional. Her appearance was that of a clear-skinned—well, if not young, at least youthful ash blonde, a trifle more simply and correctly gowned than Claire, and within a very few pounds of being as slender.

"Darling"—Claire slipped an arm about her mother's shoulders—"don't you realize that the reason I'm so edgy about Alice is that I've got to give her the use of one perfectly good chintz-covered bedroom and six or eight healthy young jazz hounds?"

"You could give her the maid's room?"

"It isn't the room, mother dear. Ah, there they are, ringing. Father's hands are too full to manage a latchkey. I'll go.

"Delighted that you could come, Alice!" she said a second later, as she pulled over the threshold a little form in a dust-colored tailor suit and floating veil. "You know these ancient halls, don't you? When this apartment house was built, it wasn't legal to have a hall less than a hundred feet long, and totally dark. Let me lead you. There, you see, we've got a nice old square living room, anyhow. I don't mind kissing you through your veil, if you don't mind my cigarette. Father and mother are looking at each other in despair. I will smoke, you know, and they can't stop me!"

"We can't stop her talking, either," George Emory said. "I'll leave her to you, Alice. I must get down town. If you don't find everything you want, your aunt or your cousin will get it for you. I've warned them that if they don't, they'll have to answer to me!"

"Old egg!" remarked his daughter, blowing him an affectionate kiss of dismissal.

"I think it's wonderful to be in New York!" the country cousin said shyly, turning to the others, as the door shut upon her host. "All the way up in the taxicab I kept saying over and over to myself how wonderful it was!"

"So this is Paris!" Claire's raillery was always accompanied by her wonderful disarming smile. "Well, it is a nice little town. I'm hoping to give you quite an exciting time, first and last. There hasn't been a visiting girl in our little group of serious drinkers for ages."

"I hope I'll do," said the guest.

"Oh, you'll do nicely. Won't she, mother?"

"She's just like Elizabeth at her age," replied Mrs. Emory. "She couldn't look more like her than she does."

"She's the expectorating image of her, isn't she? It's no use—I'm going to be rough. I'm not going to start with any false pretenses!"

"You had better show her to her room, dear," said Anna Emory, ignoring the challenge in her daughter's tone. "I'm having Katinka make her a cup of chocolate. I'll bring it in to her presently."

Claire guided her country cousin through the corridor.

"Well, this is your room," she said; "third door to your left. I suppose it looks awfully cramped and squirmy to you here, just as the suburbs look gritty and cardboardy to me. I was visiting a friend in Jersey last year, in what my friend Harrison Cobb calls the sourest of the Oranges, and the whole house creaked so that I couldn't sleep in it."

The country cousin looked about her—at the white four-poster bed, covered and ruffled with orange and blue futuristic chintz, the miniature dressing table, the chiffonier, and a set of white bookcases, all with conventionalized parrots set in optimistic medallions at uncertain intervals on their enameled surfaces.

"I'm afraid you have given up your room to me," she said.

"I'm afraid I have," Claire grimaced, but she instantly regretted the rueful admission. "I was glad to, really. I've always wanted to sleep in the maid's room, it's such a cute little place, but I never could, because there was always a maid in it. Now that Katinka is married, she has a home of her own. Don't think you have to admire my parrots. They were my last year's wild oats, when I thought I was going in for interior decorating."

"What are you going in for this year?"

Claire colored.

"Nothing especially. Boys, booze, and jazz, I guess. I believe in having a go at life before you settle down."

"Are you thinking of settling down?"

"I have thought of it, but I think I'm off it now. What gorgeous hair you have!" she went on rapidly. "Take it all the way down, and let me see it, won't you?"

Alice Worthington sank into the chair before the mirror of the little dressing table, and shook out a lovely blond coil.

"It's just the family hair," she said. "I suppose it seems dreadfully provincial of me not to have it bobbed, but mother doesn't like it."

"Bobbing has gone out," Claire said crisply. "My friend Harrison Cobb is going to be crazy about the way you look," she added irrelevantly.

Alice looked up through the veil of blond hair, drawn for the moment over her eyes, for the convenience of manipulation.

"I'm crazy to meet some New York boys," she said. "How about the length of my skirts?"

"Stand up," said Claire.

Alice stood, and twirled about obediently.

"Two inches too short."

"Too short! Why, I nearly killed mother trying to get them up so that I wouldn't look countrified in New York!"

"You'll look countrified if you wear them as short as that. Isn't it a nuisance, but they just seemed to go down overnight? The knee is shown now by an effort, instead of voluntarily, as it was last season. That's Harrison Cobb's, not mine. Never mind, we'll get mother to help us put them down again."

"I think you are awfully kind to me!"

"We strive to please, of course. I could give you something a little more exhilarating than mere chocolate, if you happened to want it."

"Hootch?" Alice advanced the suggestion with a timid and uncertain emphasis.

"You said it! Perhaps you know some of the secrets of the trade yourself, Cousin Alice. I have my own personal bootlegger."

"Father makes beer now and then."

"Good news! I don't suppose you go as far as smoking?"

"Well, I have smoked, but mother took to her bed the last time one of the girls lit one in my room, so I—"

Claire groaned.

"Alice," she said solemnly, after a minute, "I'm going to introduce you into what may seem to you to be a pretty dizzy set of young criminals. Nothing extenuate, and naught set down in malice—Shakespeare, to show that I'm educated. I think they are a pretty good crowd, and I think they are dead right in their code, and their conduct, and everything. You probably won't agree, but I'm going to show you what I think is a good time. I'm going to put the go into the golden rule, and play you up to the absolute limit!"

The blue eyes met hers gratefully.

"That's awfully nice of you!"

"I mean to be awfully nice," Claire said, a little savagely. "In fact, I've got a reason for being so. Not only do I want to do the decent thing by a member of my own family, but I want to prove something by it, too."

"Prove something?"

"Well, it would be a little complex to explain. I want to prove that I don't belong to the society of bum sports—that's about all."

II

THE cousin from the country was having a wonderful time. Claire sat at a specially reserved table at the edge of the dancing space, and watched her moving delicately through a modified fox trot—modified by Page Stewart, her partner, to what he termed the Massachusetts shimmy. Claire nodded her head approvingly at the slender figure gowned in a plain, sleeveless black chiffon, with the modish high neckline that gave the effect of a dazzling and sophisticated simplicity.

"If I hadn't forcibly removed the lace sleeves and the frilly guimpe," Claire said to herself, "and if I had left the two inches off, and the putty-colored hair flat on her head, the effect would have been a total loss!"

"What are you laughing at, Claire?"

"My thoughts, Harry. I am so cute when I think, and such a dumb-bell when I talk, that I sometimes wonder—"

"You talk all right," said Harrison Cobb, a trifle absently, with his eyes on the undulations of the dancers. "Oh, I beg your pardon, Claire. I didn't see you wanted a light."

"I've been waving this poor unlucky in the air for the last five minutes. You've been watching Alice, Harry."

"It's so refreshing to see a blonde who is a blonde. They're usually gilded somehow. Now your cousin is all genuine. Even a man can see that."

"Wouldn't you like her lips a little redder?"

"Well, that's the only thing. A lip stick sort of emphasizes a good complexion, or else we're so used to it."

"All right, we'll have the lip stick. You haven't asked me to marry you for some time, Harry."

"I'm kind of off the josh, I guess. Sometimes I think the whole crowd plays too hard. We're a little too promiscuous. Do you ever think of that?"

Claire held out the Tom Collins glass from which she was ostensibly drinking ginger ale.

"Slip out your flask and dope it up a little more," she said. "Thank you! You mean too many petting parties, Harry?"

"Well, isn't there something, when you come down to it, in the idea that the younger generation is burning the scandal at both ends? Isn't it all a little cheap, and tawdry?"

"If you say so, bo; but you never said so before. I sort of thought you liked the flavor of lip sticks."

"Don't be coarse!"

"Don't be young!" Then she added, with a burlesque briskness: "Well, Harry, by and large, what do you think of early marriages?"

Before replying, the handsome boy at her side paused long enough to extract a match from the holder on the table and strike it abstractedly.

"I should think, in general, that an early marriage might be pretty settling," he said. "Look at the way we spend our time—out every night, dancing and drinking until the small hours!"

"I don't see why they're called the small hours. They seem pretty large to me."

"We'd any of us be better if we were sitting down and thinking of the future."

"Well, I'm glad to know what you think about it. You haven't told me lately. Here are Marion and Harvey. They haven't settled down noticeably, have you, darlings?"

An overstuffed youth and an angular girl with her eyes made up outrageously, who sank into the empty chairs at Claire's left, did not seem inclined to discuss the success of their marital experiment.

"Marion is so thin she bores into me every time I dance with her," complained the young man.

"Harvey is so fat he evaporates all over me," his wife contributed. "Where is sweet Alice? Page the mouse! I don't care if it is the fortieth time I have said that. It still amuses me. Oh, there she is! Some swank, I call it. She's the bee's knees, all right—all dolled up in her hostess's own earrings. I should think you would be jealous of her, Claire!"

"I am," Claire said.

"I hear she's got all your beaus away from you."

"She has."

"How about you, Harry?"

"Harry said it with flowers only this morning," Claire interposed, before he could answer.

"Alluring little thing!"

Harvey Humiston, a connoisseur by virtue of a marriage at nineteen, assumed what he considered an appraising expression—that is, he looked down at the length of his nose, and narrowed his eyes, as Alice and her partner approached.

"That was divine!" Alice was saying. "I don't think I ever enjoyed a dance more in my life!"

"That was what you said to me last night," remarked Harrison Cobb.

He stretched up to the full length of his long legs, and stood as she seated herself. Harvey merely undulated apologetically.

"Well, it was just as true then as it is now." She smiled on the three men impartially. "I love to dance!"

"That wasn't dancing," Claire said. "You ought to let Page show you where to put the tricks in. Alice is having the time of her life in our ribald midst, without abating a jot of her principles. I don't know how you do it, dear!"

"Well, when I can't take a drink without its getting in my throat and making me cough, and when cigarettes do the same thing, I don't see why I should drink or smoke if I don't enjoy it."

"You shouldn't," said Harrison Cobb gravely.

"Dance?" suggested Page Stewart, to Marion.

"Dance?" mimicked Claire, imitating his tone exactly, and crooking an arm in the direction of Marion's husband.

Harvey climbed to his feet.

"It's better than banting," he said; "and you've got some flesh on your bones, Claire!"

"Thank you," she replied, and added, to Harrison: "You two sit it out, why don't you, and then dance the waltz? Here's to you!" She snatched up her glass, and drained it, as she spoke. "Alice thinks I'm getting stewed. Well, Harry's getting the idea that I am a pretty tough character. Come on, Harvey! Let's live up to my reputation!"

She heard the echo of her cousin's voice as she swung off into the fox trot.

"I don't think that's a very nice way to dance," said Alice plaintively.

III

Anna Emory sat prayerfully and tearfully on the edge of her bed. For three hours, or since the clock had first struck eleven, her spirit had been in the valley of Gehenna—the Gehenna of the modern mother, helplessly looking on at the slaughter of the children.

She was accustomed to having Claire—and now Alice, her naïve little guest—stay out as late as two o'clock in the morning. Remonstrance and exhortation had availed her nothing. Claire was twenty-one and an only child, and claimed the privileges enjoyed by others of her clan. When they were denied her, or when her father was constrained to set a tentative foot down, she threatened to leave home and set up an independent existence; and with Claire a threat, once seriously made, was a promise to perform.

In spite of all the familiar aspects of the situation, Claire's mother, after the manner of women, had elected this one particular night to review it with a new terror, and to suffer from it accordingly. By the time she heard the front door shut, and the two girls tiptoe their way softly past her door—Mr. Emory slept at the other end of the long hallway—she had worked herself up into a condition for action. She knew what she was going to say to Claire, and how she was going to say it.

It was while she was gathering herself for the encounter — visualizing her progress down the corridor and her dignified knock on her daughter's door—that Claire herself came rushing through the hallway like a young tornado, and catapulted into her mother's arms. She was weeping stormily.

" I was just coming to you, darling," Anna said. " I've been sitting up since eleven o'clock, waiting for you. I want to talk to you."

Claire jerked herself into an upright position on the edge of the bed.

" Well, that's one thing you can't do," she said. " I won't listen to you. I know everything you've got to say, and I think it's all wrong. I'll talk to you, or I'll go back to bed, but I won't be lectured and preached at to-night. I won't, I tell you!"

" Very well," said Anna mildly; " but you know, dear, I—"

" Oh, I know everything!" Claire's sobs were almost beyond her control now. " I'm so tired of knowing things and having to live up to them! You and father just live by a set of mid-Victorian rules. You don't know what anything means or how to handle it. You're just—"

The gleam of humor that sometimes saved Anna Emory from getting completely out of step with the march of the younger generation came to her aid now.

" All right!" she said. " Father and I are mid-Victorians; but tell mother what has gone so wrong with her little daughter."

" Nothing has gone wrong. Yes, I've been drinking a little perfectly good Scotch whisky in ginger ale, so you needn't put on your ' lips that touch liquor ' expression. Anybody who is a good sport nowadays drinks everything they can get, to show what they think of prohibition. I'm twenty-one. I—"

" You're doing all the arguing, dear. I haven't spoken."

" Well, you would, if I gave you the chance. That's why I don't give it to you." Claire mopped her tears. " I know I'm being funny, but don't laugh at me, mother. I know I'm being fresh, too, but I'm terribly serious. You older people just don't understand. You think you're all right, and we're all wrong, and that's all there is to it. We're going to hell, and you're going to heaven—that's the way you dope it; but the truth is that we're sticking out for something you don't even realize."

Anna drew the shaking form closer, and smoothed the flying mop of tawny hair.

" Are you, darling?" she said softly.

" You never knew the meaning of the word *sport*, when you were growing up. You just did what you were told, and married the boy who took you buggy riding, and all that. Life was all simple for you. Oh, I suppose it wasn't altogether simple, but it seems so from my point of view. Don't you see, mother, the world has all changed now? The young people won the war, and conditions and the pressure of living makes everything horribly complicated, and the old rules have become archaic and impossible."

" You mean to say that you have to stay out until two o'clock every night, dancing and drinking and smoking, to demonstrate your independence?" Claire's mother asked.

" Well, I do. You have to keep up with the procession—to keep your step and hold your head up. If this is life, you've got to live it the way it is, haven't you? If you don't, you're not a sport—that's all. If you can't be young the way other people are young, you're dead. You have to play the game, and if the other people, the people that made you what you are, are quitters, why, that isn't your fault!"

" Oh!" said Anna Emory gravely.

"Don't you see, mother, that all the more other people desert their banners, and go seeking after strange gods, you personally have to stick?"

" I see!" said Anna Emory, still gravely. She was grasping dimly, but still grasping, the fact that her future relations with her daughter depended much on her discretion during this hour.

" Life is terribly glorious, mother, and it can all be spoiled for you by the people that you care about being weak, and not knowing their own mind, and being blind to the true things—to character, and all that; but that doesn't mean that you must lower your own flag, mother."

Anna pressed her lips against the girl's damp forehead, and then kissed the drooping eyelids over the tired eyes.

" Mother loves you," she said. " When your eyes are closed that way, you look just as you used to look in your crib, before you grew up and got so spoiled."

Claire nestled closer.

" Do you understand what I am driving at, mother?" she said.

Anna restrained an impulse. It is difficult for a woman who has spent three hours formulating well chosen words, with which to greet a delinquent, not to deliver them at her first opportunity.

"I mustn't!" she said to herself. "I mustn't! My life depends on my not dragging Alice's name in."

"I see what you mean, dear," she said aloud. "You are fighting a new battle of independence to prove that your generation is free."

"And to prove we can take our punishment standing," added Claire.

"And to prove that you can take your punishment standing," her mother agreed solemnly.

She went back to her room circuitously, by way of her husband's door, though listening on the threshold for a moment proved him to be entirely, and almost too healthily, immersed in slumber.

"Well, all I wanted to say to you, father," she said argumentatively, though quite to herself, as she retraced her footsteps down the hallway, and began automatically removing hairpins as she went, "is that our little girl is coming out all right, if we can only have the courage to let her be for a little while longer. After that, you can spank her to your heart's content!"

IV

It was only a week or two later—events in the younger circles move swiftly—that Alice, perched on the top of a Riverside Drive bus—in the seat by the rail, which Claire so delighted to occupy—began to reveal a new aspect of the situation.

They had been discussing the most recent of their parties, a studio dance on Washington Square the night before. Claire had done rather more dancing than Alice, but Alice had seemed to be very well looked out for by Stewart Page and Harrison Cobb, who had given her what seemed to Claire the very cream of their attention.

"Do you know," Alice said suddenly, "I think I am going to learn to smoke?"

"And drink, too?"

"Well, a little—just enough to keep up with the procession."

"How come?" said Claire, grinning.

"Well, I'll tell you what I think. I think your crowd has an awfully good time. When I first came, the things they said and did—well, sort of shocked me; but after I got into it, going the rounds and all that, I began to see that it was just awfully good fun, and that was all. I began to sort of wish that I could do the same things, but then I—"

"You got on much better just the way you were. It was a novelty."

"I know it was, but now the novelty is beginning to wear off. They don't like it any more."

"Who doesn't?"

"Harry and Page."

"How do you know?"

"Well, Harry said something last night that started me thinking."

"What was it?" Claire made her tone carefully casual. "That's the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument you're passing."

"I recognized it this time. Well, he said that he liked to see girls smoke; that if he had a wife, he would want her to take a cigarette with him after dinner. I think Page feels the same way."

"Oh, Page!" Claire said. "What else did Harry say?"

"He didn't say anything else, but when I tasted his ginger ale—you know, with the gin in it—and it got up my nose, he didn't laugh. He just looked bored and polite. Page did, too."

"Oh, that's nothing!"

"It was something, Claire. It doesn't sound much the way I tell it, but—but it opened my eyes."

"Would you like to stay in New York—to live here, I mean, supposing you had the chance? I mean, if your parents moved here, or anything like that?"

"Claire," Alice said earnestly, "I just feel as if I were going to die when I went back!"

"Why go back, then?" said Claire lightly. "We'll jazz you up a bit, and see what happens then."

"Claire, you are wonderful to me!"

"We strive to please. There's the Columbia boathouse down there."

"Oh, is it? I think I'm going to be able to recognize Grant's Tomb myself!"

"Just like any other resident New Yorker! Well, I'll do my best to help the cause along."

Claire was as good as her word. The next evening, at dinner at Harvey and Marion Humiston's, she made Alice drink an experimental cocktail and smoke three cigarettes; and within a week she had her displaying a fair semblance of enjoyment in the pursuit of these forbidden pleasures. She cut out the necks of her evening gowns in daring triangles at the back, and cunningly adjusted their scant fullness in front. She taught her to make up her eyes ever so lightly, and added one by one the other daring little touches that go to make up the equipment of the modern flapper.

Alice proved a quick study. She was one of the more simple types who exist in every phase of society, who conscientiously follow the lead of authority in matters of taste and deportment. After mature consideration, she changed her authority—that was all.

The experiment seemed to work like a charm as far as the boys were concerned. Both Harrison Cobb and Page Stewart were attracted by the metamorphosis, and the metamorphoser played her part so well that nobody, with the possible exception of Anna Emory, had the slightest suspicion of the fact that she was suffering.

Anna's forbearance, indeed, was sorely tried at the new development of the situation. She had not felt seriously accountable to Alice's mother while the girl was merely a more or less innocent bystander, looking on at the game that Claire and her friends played so hard; but with her active participation, Anna's peace of mind was gone.

Still, her instinct told her not to interfere until the game was played out. Alice was twenty-two, and not of a temperamental restlessness. Besides, Anna was enough Claire's mother to feel that the younger generation should have the touchstone of its own kind with which to test its development.

" She can take it or leave it, mother," Claire said.

" Which is always a more or less specious argument," Anna returned; but she protected the whole situation from her husband, nevertheless.

The moment arrived, however, when she could not so conceal it. The two girls had motored, with Page and Harry and the Humistons, to a suburban resort for dinner. There had been dancing, and evidently plenty of drinks, for at about eleven o'clock Claire helped Alice Worthington into the house. After making her cousin comfortable on the ivory-enameled bed, under the surveillance of the two most cockeyed of the parrots, she came slowly into the living room, to the reckoning which awaited her.

" I'm afraid she's stewed," she said. " I thought she knew her own head by this time, but I regret to say she doesn't. She'll sleep it off."

" Claire," said her father, advancing a portentous step toward the center of the room, " have you ever been what you call stewed?"

" Once," said Claire, " or else I wasn't feeling very well. I passed out for a few minutes."

" Weren't you ashamed of yourself?"

" Not at the time. I was rather proud of it."

" Are you proud of it now?"

" No," said Claire.

" What do your friends think of this performance to-night?"

" Harry said he thought she was a dead game little sport."

" Is that your general idea of the situation, too?"

" Yes, and no."

" You admit you have no sense of shame or decency left?"

" I don't admit that."

" Well, this is my ultimatum—you can clear out your whole gang of precious friends, and continue to live under my roof, or you can clear out with them."

" Oh, George!" Anna Emory wrung her hands. " Don't you realize that *isn't* the way?"

" All right—I'll clear out," Claire said, ignoring her mother. " As soon as I can get Alice's affairs fixed up, I'll go."

" Claire, your father doesn't mean what he says!"

" Well, I mean what I say."

" My God!" said George Emory.

They heard the bell ring at the door of the apartment.

" That will be Harry, to inquire for Alice. If you two don't mind very much, I should like to see him in here for a minute," said Claire.

Anna Emory took her husband by the arm.

" George," she said, " for the sake of all our futures, come with me for a moment now!"

George turned toward his daughter with a gesture of helplessness, but his face was still set.

" Oh, father, go!" Claire begged him.

Something in her strained young face made George Emory turn away without a word.

" Well, Harry!" she said, as she faced young Cobb in the vacated living room.

" How is she?" he asked a little hoarsely.

" Sleeping it off. It was all my fault.

I wasn't on the job. She isn't used to it, and I should have watched her."

"Page is terribly worried."

"Why?"

"He thinks it's his fault. He gave it to her."

"Nope—it's mine."

"Well, she was a dead game little sport! I've seen what she was up to for some time—out-Romaning the Romans."

"You and Page fell for her the other way, and then you got tired of it," Claire said accusingly.

"Well, she was beginning to cramp our style. Page wouldn't be satisfied with a girl for very long unless she could handle herself."

"I'm sorry about to-night, then."

"Oh, well, this was an accident. Accidents will happen in the best regulated gangs."

Claire, who had been standing, sank down on the end of the couch by the window. Harrison took out his cigarette case, and followed suit.

"No," said Claire, "I'm not smoking—not now, or ever. I'm through. You'd better take your precious Alice away from my influence as soon as you can, or I'll turn it the other way, and bring her back to her senses, no matter what you and Page think or don't think!"

"You didn't like that little exhibition to-night, then?"

"I thought it was disgusting. What is more, I thought we were disgusting."

"Claire," said Harrison Cobb solemnly, "so did I!"

"It just isn't the way things ought to be—that's all. Up to lately I thought it was. I believed all the rot about being free; but when I saw Alice, when I realized that you and Page liked to see her getting like the rest of us, why, then I gave up. It was bad enough to see you falling for the country mouse and all her innocent little airs and graces. I know it's a silly way of putting it."

"I know what you mean," Harrison said.

"But when I saw you egging her on to get herself lit, and to smoke herself to death, and to dance cheek to cheek, and all the other rubbish, it just made me sick. I'm through. The sooner you marry Alice and get her straightened out into whatever you want her to be, the better. I'm going to get out, and go into settlement work. I've just told father."

"Wait a minute!" Harrison said. "Did I understand you to say I'd better marry Alice? Page is going to do that, you know. They settled it to-night. That's why he's so conscience stricken."

"Page is going to marry Alice! Page Stewart! Why, I thought it was you that fell for her!"

"Not very far, darling. I was just marking time, and watching the game, and trying to figure out what was in your head."

"But Page is going to marry Alice! I can't believe it!"

"Yes, dear little girl, and I'm going to marry you, now that you've reformed. Come here!"

Claire crept into his arms obediently, and rubbed her cheek against the rough tweed of his coat lapel.

"Well, I can't believe that, either!" she sighed.

LOVE'S PRODIGAL

He slipped his burden to seek a flower,
  Forsook his passion to follow a song;
Beauty called him out for an hour,
  And he was happy—just that long.

But it seemed that the naked beauty needed
  A film of the tears that turn one blind;
And the song was less sweet than a voice that pleaded—
  The cry of a love he had left behind.

So he turned from the flower to face the pain,
  And shouldered the burden that he'd let fall;
And an empty heart welled full again,
  And he was happier—tears and all!

T. Morris Longstreth

The Tarnished Woman

A STORY OF MODERN LIFE IN THE INTERNATIONAL PLAYGROUND OF THE RIVIERA

By Vance Thompson

Author of "The Man of the Miracle," "Eat and Grow Thin," etc.

ON his way from Monte Carlo to San Remo, where he is staying, Andrew Torpichen has two adventures. The first is a violent brawl with a stranger—named Prince Kurokin, as he learns later—who needlessly insults him. The second is a meeting with a ragged Russian refugee, who begs Torpichen to help him to get into Italy, as the frontier guards have barred him out. Andrew refuses, but on reaching San Remo he finds that the vagabond has accompanied him, having hidden himself under a pile of rugs in Torpichen's car while the owner's back was turned.

The next day he sees this same fellow go to the gate of a villa in San Remo and give the butler a small package—"for your master," the vagabond says. Torpichen also encounters the lady of the villa, Lamia Borg, a blond beauty who, from their first meeting, seems to hold him under some strange spell. It is a disturbing fascination, for he is engaged to Betty Demdyke, an American girl who is a distant connection of his, her aunt, now the Princess Castelmare, having formerly been married to old Matt Bulmer, Andrew's great-uncle.

The princess, who is also at San Remo, learns of the young man's association with Lamia. She takes him severely to task, and compels him to give up his engagement to Betty. He has nothing, now, to keep him away from Lamia, and they spend days and evenings of growing enchantment together; but one night, at her villa, just as he has taken her into his arms, and they are making the first avowal of their mutual passion, Prince Kurokin comes into the room and informs Torpichen that the woman is his wife.

"It is a lie!" Lamia returns. "I am not his wife! I am his mistress!"

Torpichen, overwhelmed, rushes out of the house.

XII

LAMIA had not moved. She stood erect, her hands clasped behind her, staring at the open door through which Andrew Torpichen had gone away.

Prince Kurokin watched her with unsmiling eyes, though there was a smile on his red lips. At last he went over and glanced out into the hall. It was empty. He closed the door and came again to where the woman stood.

Still he did not speak. From the little table near by he took up a cigarette and lit it. He showed no anger. Rather it was a bad kind of joy—something inscrutably evil and cruel and base.

He held his cigarette in his left hand, between the thumb and the first two fingers. On the third finger was a thick gold ring with a big diamond—a great blazing stone, which seemed to be saying:

"Look at me, and look, too, at the finger—especially the finger!"

The third finger of that left hand had been broken at the second joint, and broken in such a way that it lay over sidewise. More than anything else about him, it seemed to be significant of the man. The hand itself was large and shapely and white, like Kurokin himself, but instinctively what one saw was only the crooked finger, with its swollen joint, and the barbaric ring—splendor and deformity.

He was a big man, and athletic-looking, although he seemed to be under weight. He might have been thirty, thirty-five—it were hard to say, his face was so deeply marked by years of passion and peril. The mouth was insolent and weak; only the

EDITORIAL NOTE—This serial appeared in two preceding numbers of MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE as "The Tainted Woman." The change in the title is made at the request of the author.

Copyright, 1923, by Vance Thompson—This story began in the October number of MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE

pale eyes, cold and cruel as naked steel, seemed to explain how this man had been able to escape, by craft or daring, from the hell of blood and ordure and anarchy in which old Russia lay wallowing.

Though he kept himself in hand, with a mimicry of Western self-control, it was evident that underneath there lay something savage, something that might scream aloud in discordant rage, or in laughter still more frightful. With this he had the racial charm of the Slav, which is made up of indolence, fatalism, indifference, mysticism—with strange possibilities of sudden violence.

It may have been this charm that had once drawn Lamia to him. Something in him had called to her—perhaps the compelling mystery in the man, the sense of mystery, savage and impenetrable as her native forests. And this air of mystery still clung to him, she thought, as he stood in front of her there in the brilliant drawing-room, dandling a cigarette in his jeweled, deformed hand.

She was not afraid of him. She had never feared him. Indeed, the fear that crept into her dreams at night had nothing to do with living men; but she was surprised to feel how tense, of a sudden, her hatred for him had become.

It was not because of what he had done to her. In that evil she had been his accomplice — careless, dazzled, unreflecting, ignorant, but still his accomplice. Her new, swift hatred for him was due to his having laid his hand upon her shoulder—the master's hand posed on her naked flesh.

His thing! His? She was no longer his! Indeed, she knew now that she had never been really his; and she faced him without fear, with anger colder and deadlier than his own.

"I think we have seen the last of him, eh?" Kurokin said slowly.

"One never knows," she answered calmly. "Anything may happen."

"But if I say it!" he exclaimed. "If I tell you, if I command you—"

"Please don't be melodramatic. It's too silly," Lamia retorted, with quiet scorn. "And what have you to do with him—or with me?"

He dropped the smoldering cigarette and clasped his hands together, as if trying to hold fast to his self-control. Then, slowly, his face reddened, and the blood seemed to rush into his eyes. It was as if through the mask of a man's face an animal were glaring at her; and with that the words came—a torrent of words in English and French and in his own high-keyed, snarling speech.

What frightened her was the unknown words. They might mean anything, and the unknown is always terrible; but the man and the man's rage did not frighten her.

"In my country," he was saying, "we know how to handle women like you—"

He made a ruffian's gesture, and approached her. So slight she was, he could have broken her like a reed; but the blow did not fall. Slowly his hand dropped. No quiet generations of culture had bred courage in him—as the years drill courage into a soldier—and before her resolute disdain his barbaric rage crumbled and went weak.

Even the breeding of his rank seemed to have fallen away from him. His outburst had been the brawling of a stable boy, who, at the crucial moment, could not whip himself beyond the violence of words, the scream of a barbarian.

Lamia turned away, indifferent. If there had been any fear, hidden even in her innermost soul, she knew he would have trampled her under his feet. She might have known he would be a coward, as well as all the rest. What did it matter? Now, nothing mattered. She had read in Andrew Torpichen's face that nothing mattered now in all the world.

Without a glance at Prince Kurokin she went out, opening the door for herself, crossing the wide hall, and going slowly up the stairs, erect, indifferent, as if she were alone in the desert of her life.

And Kurokin waited — waited until he could no longer hear her footsteps. He was angry enough, but something worse than anger had possession of him. He realized that in the duel between the woman's soul and his own soul he had met defeat. For all the weakness of her little hands, for all that her body was so fragile that he could twist it like a green twig, she was the stronger.

That was what was horrible—to confront a feeble thing and suddenly to discover in it not only mastery, but disdain. His weak and savage nature sought blindly for a way of vengeance—safe vengeance, to be taken in the dark. Under his breath he cursed the woman and himself.

Abruptly he rang the bell.

"Here!" he said, when Guido came. "Take this!"

He stripped off the fur coat he had been wearing when he entered the room, and tossed it to his servant. He was dressed in travel-stained tweeds.

"I'll change," he added. "Put out my clothes. I'm going out."

"Everything is ready, excellency," Guido replied, his shrewd eyes studying the prince. "I did not know whether you would wear a black tie or a white one, so I laid out both suits; and the bath is ready."

"All right!"

There was a liqueur cabinet in the room. Kurokin poured out a half tumblerful of Benedictine, and drank it down, before going up to his bedroom, which was at the front of the house, directly above the salon. Guido followed him. He was quiet, observant, suave, this butler-valet, and he went deftly about his business. When the prince came from the bath, he aided him to dress. He had been kneeling at Kurokin's feet, putting on his shoes. He stood up and held out the silk-lined dinner coat.

"You have received the message, prince?" he said softly.

"What message?"

"I left it on your writing desk by the window—there."

"What are you talking about?"

"That package. It is for you, excellency. And to-night"—he lowered his voice to an oily whisper—"this came. It was in the latch of the door. When I opened the door to admit your excellency, it fell at my feet. This!"

He held out a dirty scrap of paper, on which was written a message he had not been able to read—six words in Russian, boldly printed with pencil. Kurokin read it at a glance, and Guido saw the color go out of his master's face. Then the cold eyes stared at him. There was no longer fear in them.

Of those two men there was no doubt who was the stronger. The soft flunky, with his ineradicable habit of servitude, was precisely the kind of man the Russian could dominate; and Kurokin stared the butler down, until the black, treacherous eyes wavered and fell.

"It is that?" he asked. He pointed to the little oblong packet in soiled paper cover lying on the writing desk.

"Yes, excellency."

"How did it come here?"

Truthfully, for he could not see his way to a profitable lie, Guido told him of the scene with the vagabond at the gate of the villa. He did not mention the limping peasant who had accompanied the vagabond—perhaps he had forgotten. Kurokin listened, always with that white, set face, and asked no questions.

"He said your excellency was to have the packet—when you came. And the moment you entered the house," Guido continued, "that note fell at my feet."

"Give me that thing—wait!"

"Yes, excellency."

"Did you mention this to any one?"

"Not to a soul."

"That man who was here to-night—what is his name?"

"The American? It is Torpichen. He could not know anything about it. Nothing! I know—I alone know," Guido said significantly, "and I do not talk of things that concern your excellency. It would not be worth my while."

"Nor would it be safe, Guido. Now give me the thing, and get out of here!"

Kurokin took the dirty packet in his hand. Until he was alone, he made no movement to open it. Even then he hesitated, as if wrapped up in the dingy paper there might be something deadly — something with hidden powers of destruction.

At last he moved closer to the light. The paper was tied up in a tangle of strings, and he had to cut them loose. Then there was a wrapper of oilskin, which he tore off. Beneath this was a rag of stained linen, and his fingers came in contact with something which caused him—with a scream half of terror, half of rage — to hurl the packet away. On his face was the look of one who sees death coming toward him running fast. His breath choked in him.

Then, softly, the door opened, and Guido looked in.

"The car is waiting, excellency," he said.

Kurokin did not answer, save for an oath. Throwing the butler aside, he rushed down the stairs, and a second later Guido heard the front door slam. Then the servility vanished from his face, and the native cunning of the man looked forth.

He scanned the room. On the floor lay the dirty paper wrapper and the oilskin. Guido picked them up. Near the fireplace, where wooden logs were blazing, lay the packet. Had it been thrown a few inches farther, the flames would have eaten it.

He took it up gingerly, unfolded it, and glanced at the contents. Very carefully he wrapped it up again in its threefold covers and slipped it into an inner pocket. What he was hiding away—so he would have told himself, if he had not been secretive even with himself—was not the filthy packet, but something that had sent the pallor to his master's face and brought terror into his eyes. It was one of those secrets from which a cautious lackey may have much to gain; and therefore Guido had hidden it away in an inner pocket.

Without waiting to put the room in order, without even shutting off the electric light, he went swiftly downstairs. The lower part of the house seemed empty. At the back, the hall opened on a courtyard, where tall exotic plants stood mournfully in tubs and jars. To the right of the court were the servants' quarters and the kitchens, while beyond, to the left—a separate building—was the garage.

In the second kitchen there was a light, and there, by the stove, one of the maids sat reading.

"Grazia!"

The girl turned and scowled up at him over her shoulder.

"And what do you want?"

She was a short girl, powerful, with good steady eyes, set wide apart; the sort of girl who at forty should have half a dozen children of her own surging about her knees and climbing on her back. Merely to look at her made one think of strength and sanity and goodness. Withal there was a certain truculence about her before which Guido found himself abashed.

She was Lamia's personal maid—a position to which she had appointed herself, and which she held by right of conquest.

"Has *madame* gone to bed?" Guido asked.

"What's that to you?"

"I only want to know if you would do me a favor and sit up a bit longer," Guido explained, "in case the bell rings, or the telephone. I have to go out."

"I'm not going to bed until I'm sure she doesn't want me any more," Grazia replied. "She may want me. Where's your vile Russky? Is he out of the house?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Probably to the Casino."

Guido grinned, and dealt imaginary cards.

"I hope he loses his head!" retorted Grazia.

"He has had a pleasant evening," Guido sneered. "I thought that American fellow was going to punch his face for him. I waited for it. I was watching 'em, for I left the door ajar. I was hoping for a good fight, for they are both big men, but they didn't bring it off."

"Fight? Your dirty prince fight a man? He wouldn't dare fight a woman unless she were ill—that's his size! The dog! I wish the *Americano* had killed him!"

"What's that to you? Go on with your book, and attend to the bells. You could hear better if you were in the dining room," Guido suggested.

"I'll be well enough here, if you get out!"

Grazia hitched herself nearer the stove and went back to her book. If her mistress had a fancy for sitting by the window of her bedroom above stairs until daylight, she had a fancy for sitting there within quick hearing of her bell.

"I'll not be very late, Grazia."

"The later the better!"

Guido took his coat and hat from his own pantry, and went out through the court at the back. He crossed the garden to the wall which skirted the ravine. There was no gate, but at an angle, where the bushes grew thick, the stones had been pulled away enough to afford an exit for one who did not mind scrambling on hands and knees.

Guido knew that rough road, even in the dark. He had made many a nocturnal journey in quest of the obscure dissipations of the old town.

Beyond the wall, the path dropped abruptly down the ravine and crossed the bed of the *torrente*, now dry and baked by the winter sun. It was a short cut to the town, but Guido had, this night, another reason for choosing that dangerous road.

The messenger who had brought the cryptic note—written in a language that Guido could not read—and stuck it in the door, had not entered by the front gate. Had he, too, discovered this secret path? Had he crept into the garden here where the thicket hid the broken wall? There was no other way.

And which one had come? That insolent and hairy vagabond? It was the other one, the little limping fellow, with the quick eyes, that Guido wanted to find. That one first! He was the sort of man with whom Guido felt more competent to deal regarding the note—and the packet—that had turned Prince Kurokin's face to wet clay; and the butler thought he knew where to find him.

He came out in a small street near the Via Palazzo. It was very dark, but through the half curtained windows of a wine shop a feeble light struggled out. Guido pushed the door open and went in.

The patron was playing cards with four dingy fellows. Two women with heavy faces and thick black eyebrows sat warming their fat knees at a charcoal brazier. At a table in the corner was the man of whom he had come in search, hunched over a glass of grog.

Guido, dragging a chair with him, went over to the table and sat down. The little gardener did not speak. He merely twisted his head up, like a squirrel, and fastened his bright eyes on the mask which was supposed to be Guido's real face.

"Another grog?"

The gardener nodded, emptied his glass, and rapped on the table. The sulky landlord finally brought the drink and went back to his cards.

"Here's to you!" said Guido. "I knew we'd meet again. Ever since that first time up at the villa—at the gate—I saw you were the man for me; so I kept my eyes open, and when I found who you were—"

Guido broke off and laughed.

"To think of you living up there with the crows, and cawing and praying like the rest of 'em, I suppose!"

He laughed again, but there was no laughter in the dark little man, who sat watching with quick, furtive eyes.

"And to-night, when you left that note in the door, I told myself it was time you and I had a little talk, eh? Where's the other fellow—the big bully who was with you, eh?"

At last the gardener spoke.

"Did you give that note to—to him?"

"I gave it to the prince—yes."

They were both whispering now.

"And the packet? He has got it?"

Guido did not intimate that the packet was in his own inner pocket. His answer was:

"Yes—and it knocked him all of a heap. Like that!"

He dropped in his chair, his mobile face reflecting terror. The little man nodded.

"That's it," he said; "and where is he now?"

"I am not sure, but you may safely lay a wager he's at the Casino." Again the butler shuffled imaginary cards. "He'll be late coming home."

"But he will come?"

"No doubt of it. Now, little man, what's your game? If I'm against you, why, you and your bully with the hair on his face won't get far in this town, I can tell you! It isn't alone the police—though, if I stirred 'em up, I think both you and the bully would have a pretty hard time of it. No, it's not the police—it's me! I'm the one that can put you both out of business! Now what's the game? Is it worth my while?"

"If you want money, it is worth your while."

"Big money?"

"All he's got."

"All who's got?"

"That prince of yours—all he's got—all he can get—all!"

They were whispering over the grog, their heads close together.

"And my share, little man?"

"Come with me," the gardener said softly. "He is waiting — you shall talk to him."

"To the bully—your pal? If I go in, it has got to be a fair deal—and big money," declared Guido.

The gardener waited until his companion paid for the drinks. Then, shrugging his cloak around him, he limped out into the street. The butler, making sure that his revolver was ready to hand in an outside pocket of his coat, followed closely.

A half hour later, Prince Kurokin's faithful body servant guided two creeping figures through the break in the wall above the ravine, and through the tangled thicket, into the garden of his villa.

There was no moon.

XIII

When Torpichen left the salon, thrusting aside the lurking butler, he had only one thought—to get as far away as possible from the unclean house and the woman and her man.

Guido gave him his coat and hat. The lackey's face was expressionless. Nothing in his look or manner indicated the relish with which he had watched, through the partly opened door, all that passed between the two men and the woman; but Torpichen knew. The fellow had been a vile witness of the scene; but what did it matter?

The door closed on him noiselessly. Automatically he lit a cigarette and went toward the gate. There were no lights in the garden, and he walked slowly, feeling his way. When he reached the gate, he halted, and then, after a moment, turned deliberately and retraced his steps.

Lights shone from the lower windows of the villa. Lights flashed up in the windows above the salon, and presently there came a light from the garage.

Torpichen crossed the lawn, keeping well to the right of the house, picking his way around the trees and past the sham marble statues—their mean nudity a mere glimmer in the darkness. He stumbled upon some garden chairs, grouped under a tree. He sat down in one of the chairs, his eyes fixed on the evil house.

He was perfectly calm—inexorably calm; and as he sat there, motionless, he began to realize that his calm was not natural. There was something abnormal about it, just as it was not natural that the hand with which he held his cigarette should be so steady. Not a nerve twitched. Not an emotion seemed to ripple across his cold and level mind.

"That's a queer thing!" he told himself. "I should have thought—"

Then he knew. The anger that held him was cold anger. It was old Matt's kind of anger, before which two generations had quailed.

It was strange that he should be thinking of old Matt Bulmer, the fortune builder of his family; and yet he was thinking of him—of the old man as he saw him last, savage and senile—and of the lair in Yorkshire from which he had come to raid New York. It was from "Canny Yatton" that he had come conquering. There was much more to him than just money—there was a wrathful kind of power.

Torpichen thought of the fortune that had come to him from this old kinsman. That was natural enough. What's born of a cat can't help having fleas; but had he inherited, too, the old millionaire's black temper? Matt Bulmer had been a dangerous man.

Involuntarily, quite unexpectedly, he thought of something Lamia, in her chatter, had once said to him.

"Did you ever kill a man?" she asked casually, and then, in her queer little apologetic way, she had added: "But I suppose I shouldn't ask that."

The thought would not let go of him. He wondered whether he—Andrew Torpichen, the man sitting in the quiet garden—had something deep within him that sooner or later would emerge—

Yes—something was trying to get out. He listened, waiting for a voice from his own soul. It came in a whisper:

"Murder!"

He was not startled. So that was what had been lurking in the profoundest depth of his being! He had never suspected its existence, and now it had fluttered out, like a flying toad from a cavern, obscene.

Well, that was that. What a man does is what the inner voice bids him do, and nothing can stop him. Again he heard the whispered word:

"Murder!"

Strange that he should be sitting so quietly in this quiet garden, listening, aloofly, to this clear, small voice within!

He heard other voices repeating the word. They, too, came from within and from without, and he told himself that they were the voices of all the vanished ancestors who had collaborated, through the ages, to make him the man he was—sitting there in the garden. Ancestors who had slain, ancestors who had died unsatisfied because they had not dared to slay, were whispering to him:

"Kill!"

They gathered around him in the night. He could hear their unhuman footsteps rustling on the grass—or was it the cursed Judas tree, behind him, muttering of betrayal and death?

Quite certainly he knew it was the man he meant to kill. He would kill the man and then bury himself in the night, for he had no desire to see the light of another day. He was too dirty. He felt as if he had been dragged through a sewer—he and his poor love.

As he thought of Lamia, he stiffened in his chair. His deadly calm began to break. What was the good of telling himself that she was nothing to him—that she was not real—that she was something he had fashioned out of phantasy? An ideal he had made for himself and worshiped—that was all. He had loved his dream, and not that vile, blond beast, with her laughter and amours and lies.

And suddenly he was afraid; for he knew, in spite of anger and denial, that he still loved her. She was that kind of a woman, and he loved her—that kind of a woman! What was the use of trying to cheat himself? He loved her—the woman herself, and not some shadowy ideal. He loved her as she was—with the evil on her—his tarnished woman. In every fiber of his being, in his tortured soul and maddened flesh, he loved her!

And therefore he was afraid; for with his love came jealousy. They seemed to be part of each other, like the two sides of a coin. He had but to close his eyes to see the white, tragic face he loved, and beside it that other face—leering, wicked, insolent—the face of the man.

The house of love is the house of jealousy.

He waited, watching himself, as he might have watched a stranger, wondering what red deed he was destined to do. Had the ancestral voices been prophetic?

"Murder!" they had whispered.

His own dark soul repeated it; and near him the Judas tree, with all its evil leaves, muttered it again and again:

"Murder!"

"I must get out of this place," he said suddenly.

He tried to pull himself from his chair; but something stronger than his will to escape held him down. He was chained there by his jealousy and by his love—both of them, the man and the woman held him—and he waited, dull, inert, suffering, for what must be, for the thing that must work itself out to a predestined end.

At that moment a motor car came around the drive from the garage on the other side of the villa, and stopped under the *porte cochère*. Then the hall door opened, and in a flood of pale light he saw Prince Kurokin descend the steps and get into the automobile. With blazing headlights the car sped down the driveway, through the gates, and out into the road.

They were no longer together. The man had gone—was no longer with her.

Torpichen felt as if his passion had been sheared in two. His lust for murder was speeding down the road after the man, while his angry love hovered around the house, where the woman was.

He stood up, and went slowly toward the window. He had taken but a few steps when a low voice called him. It came from the upper balcony, which opened into Lamia's room.

She was leaning there on the balustrade, looking down at him. She was dressed in white—that kind of woman in the irony of white!—with white furs around her. Her hair fell about her face as, once, he had seen it under the olive trees. That must have been a lifetime ago, ages ago, he thought.

"Andrew!" It was a low, tremulous voice that came whispering down to him through the night. "Andrew!"

"Yes."

He found it hard to say even that one word. His mouth was dry.

"Wait! I will come down."

He watched her disappear into her room. Then he walked over to the side entrance of the house, where the French windows gave directly on the garden. Somehow or other, he knew it was there he would meet her.

Almost immediately one of the windows was opened. Against a background of dying firelight he saw the whiteness—oh, irony!—of what he knew was Lamia. She was a ghostly shimmer of white.

"Come in, Andrew!" she whispered.

She took his hand and led him into the darkened room. As he entered, the mocking firelight leaped up, and he saw the old look in her face—covetousness and anguish and dim terror.

She sank down in a chair, pulling her furs around her. Through the half open window the cold night air crept into the room.

"Will you not speak to me, Andrew?" she begged.

"To say what?" he asked.

He was standing over her, and, as he spoke, he backed away toward the mantelpiece and leaned there, aloof, in seeming indifference. What was in his mind he could not have told himself — confusion, pain, perhaps, through which his compelling love for her gloomed angrily.

"Oh, Andrew, don't you want me to explain? Don't you want to understand?" Lamia pleaded.

The anguish in her voice hurt him, but he did not answer her. What did it matter? What good were words? It was a fact they had to face.

"Andrew! Let me tell you how it happened. I am not so much to blame as you think. I didn't know—"

He interrupted her.

"You don't need to explain anything. Why should you explain? What good would it do?"

"But you must know about me! It isn't what you think—that is, I am not nearly so much to blame as you think."

"I'm not thinking—I'm past that," he said, half to himself.

"If I had only known!" she went on in that hopeless voice that stabbed him. "If I had not been so young—so inexperienced—if I had known—"

"What?"

"That you were coming, Andrew—that somewhere you were in the world, a living man, and that you were coming to me! My God, if I had only known!" She was crouching in the chair, small and pitiful in her furs. "But I didn't know! That is what it is to be a woman. We do not know until it is too late, and then—then—"

She stopped abruptly, and buried her face in her hands. Torpichen did not speak, watching her, his face as white as her own. At last she looked up at him, and all that was woman in her was in her appealing eyes.

"Andrew," she said, "if you would only understand that it is real—that my love for you is real! It's my whole life, Andrew! You do believe me? Only I didn't know you were coming to me until it was too late—too late!"

She got slowly to her feet, swaying a little, and came toward him.

"But you'll never forget it was real, Andrew! When you think of me, you will never forget that — never! Think of me that way, Andrew! And now it is good-by. In this world it is good-by."

She moved slowly away from him, her eyes on his face, as if she would take with her an eternal memory.

And then Torpichen spoke.

"Come here, Lamia," he said quietly.

For an instant she paused. Then she went toward him, wavering, uncertain.

"What do you mean? What are you going to do to me?" she whispered.

"You are going to choose," he replied, "between two things. If you mean to stay in this house, as God is my witness and my judge, I will kill that man to-night. Choose—for I ask you to come with me, out of this house, now and forever. Now!" he repeated, so quietly that the words at first hardly carried their real meaning to her.

"To go with—you?"

"Now."

"With you?"

"With me."

He did not urge her. Close though she stood to him, he did not touch her; and his voice was calm as if he were speaking of things far off and indifferent. She, too, was very still—though in that dim room, where the firelight flickered, two unhappy young souls were playing, they knew, the game of life and death.

"It must be forever, Lamia."

"It will be forever, Andrew. Wherever you want me to go, until the end; but not with you. I will leave this house to-night, but I will leave it alone."

It was only her hand that he touched. He held it lightly, and did not draw her to him.

"Very well," he said calmly. "Where do you wish to go?"

"I shall go to the Countess Louvorsky. She is a friend."

"You will permit me to accompany you there?"

"Yes."

He had noticed that under the long furs that covered her she seemed to be wearing only some clinging house garment. Glancing down, he saw her little naked feet in foolish satin slippers.

"How soon can you be ready to go?" he inquired.

"It will not take me very long."

He looked down into her face. She was staring past him with wide, apprehensive eyes.

"Listen! Did you hear that?" she exclaimed in a hushed voice.

"Nothing, Lamia—I heard nothing."

"In the garden—there are voices—"

Torpichen listened intently. From the garden there came to him only the sound of the night wind in the trees.

"There is nothing, Lamia," he repeated reassuringly.

"There were voices," she insisted. "I heard a sort of cry — his voice — that man's!"

She clung to him in sudden terror.

He supposed that her imagination had caught at some sound in the night, and transformed it into the voice she feared;

but he held his peace and listened intently, as she was listening, with every sense alert.

The moments passed. He heard only the murmur of the night.

" And yet I heard it," she whispered, and there was increasing fear in her voice.

" Wait here. I will go and see."

" No, no, no!" she cried. " I'll not let you go!"

Her fear was for him out there in the dark. She clung to him desperately. Gently he tried to release himself. He bent over her, murmuring soothing words.

" It is all right," he said. " There is nothing."

Her eyes were on the windows giving on the garden.

" Look!" she whispered.

Slowly the windows were opening, pushed from without. They stood wide now, to the night, and a dark figure showed dimly. For a moment it hung there, motionless—formidable in its shapelessness—and then crept forward stealthily into the room.

It was Kurokin.

Suddenly he saw Lamia and Torpichen, together, in the firelight. Surprise at first checked him; then he shouted aloud. It was a barbaric cry, animal and obscene; and there followed a babble of words in his own wild tongue. Then, abruptly, he laughed.

With that he turned and closed the windows, drawing them together. He found an electric switch and flooded the room with light; and at last they could see him.

All the suavity and aristocratic grace that had made him Prince Kurokin had fallen from him, as a cloak falls. He was hatless, and his hair was disheveled. His very clothes, twisted and awry, seemed to be part of his savage ignobility. His face was evil. It was gray, and the muscles in it twitched. His lips were drawn back, showing the teeth. His eyes were bloodshot, fixed, hallucinate.

He might have come out of some pit of infamy and horror.

Still babbling, he came toward them, dragging at something in his pocket. As his hand came free, Torpichen saw the revolver—the firelight glinting on the steel.

Lamia, too, had seen it, and instantly she threw herself in front of him, shielding with her little body the man she loved. She stood there, her arms outspread like one crucified.

At that moment Kurokin fired. With a little cry she reeled aside, and Torpichen sprang toward the Russian, his eyes on that murderous face. He had no weapon—only his hands. On a stand near by was a plaster bust—the monstrous head of some satyr thing. Instinctively his hands closed on it, and, as Kurokin raised his revolver a second time, Torpichen hurled it with all his strength. The bust crashed full into the evil face.

As it fell in fragments, there came a scream—a scream like that of a wounded horse; and Kurokin, blind and bleeding, went staggering back and back, and crashed through the windows, in a shower of broken glass, into the night. So savagely had the bust been hurled that fragments of it rolled out into the garden, as if pursuing him.

Swiftly as the missile had sped, Torpichen was almost as quick. He ran to the window, still in savage pursuit of Kurokin. Nothing! There was only the night, implacable, enveloping everything with mystery. The man had not fallen on the turf, and there was no sound of running feet—only darkness and silence.

Torpichen ran back to the salon. Lamia was standing there, clinging for support to a tall chair. Her eyes were full of terror. As Torpichen drew near, she saw the look in his face.

" Andrew! My God, you have killed him!" she cried aloud.

The white furs slipped from her shoulders. Her little garments beneath were red with blood, and she put her hand to her breast. Then she wavered to and fro, and, before he could reach her, fell suddenly full length upon the floor.

XIV

Lamia lay unconscious, breathing faintly. She had been carried to her room in Torpichen's arms, and laid upon the bed.

The agonizing minutes went by. The wound was in the left side, just beneath the arm — a clean wound, for the bullet seemed to have traversed the body. Torpichen had drawn the garments away, exposing it to the air, and in a little while the bleeding had ceased.

Kneeling at the bedside, Grazia chafed the white body, striving to bring back the warmth of life.

" She's very cold, like a corpse you have to wash. Can't you bring her back?" she asked Torpichen.

"The doctor should be here in a moment," he replied. "You told the chauffeur to drive fast?"

The doctor came. It was not the wound that troubled him most; that was only a flesh wound, and the bleeding had been beneficial.

"You did quite right not to touch it," he said, when he had dressed it. "It will do very well now. What I am afraid of is the shock. Of course, the injury is enough to cause some shock, but this seems to go deeper. There is something else?"

"Yes, there is something else," Torpichen replied.

"Mental? There is a very profound depression of the nervous system," the doctor explained.

He applied his remedies, fighting this deep prostration with heat and stimulants; but she could not swallow the drink. Her breath came feeble and shallow; and in the little wrist the pulse was practically imperceptible.

Dawn came, but Lamia did not waken to consciousness. Far off in some obscure dream her spirit seemed to wander, oblivious of the deserted body that lay inert upon the bed. It was as if the woman and her soul were dissociated, or linked only by a tenuous, floating cord, so fragile that the slightest effort might sever it.

Torpichen kneeled beside her, all his will concentrated in an agonized determination to hold back that fleeting spirit.

"Come back, come back to me, Lamia! You shall not go! Come back to me!"

It was for him she was dying. She had thrown herself between him and death. She had taken in her little sacrificial body the bullet meant for him. She must come back and see him kneeling there, and the love in his eyes!

A nurse had been sent in. Another physician had been summoned, but dawn broadened into day, and he had not yet come. And when he came? What could he do that had not been done?

Grazia had no faith in their science, nor in Torpichen's silent battle with the powers of death. Only God, who gave life in the beginning, could save it in the end. That was her creed; and she knew that God's special delegate to San Remo was the old priest.

The *padre*—he was the delegate of Omnipotence. If he could not always conquer death, always he could save the fleeting soul, so potent were the mysterious words he murmured over the dying. Only the *padre* she trusted—and herself.

By a short cut across the ravine, glancing neither to right nor to left, she ran to the old town, and to the great garden and the austere house on the hill. The *padre* was talking to a young man, a foreigner, whom she did not know. He listened to her breathless explanation — her mistress dying, shot by Prince Kurokin, who had fled; and Mr. Torpichen was there.

"Come with me, Forbess," said the priest.

The young man had understood little of Grazia's talk, disfigured as it was with the Ligurian *patois*. He nodded assent.

"Of course, if you want me, *padre*."

"I don't know, but come."

A taxicab brought them to the villa. As Grazia had ridden with the driver, they had learned nothing more than she had told them in her hurried explanation, beseeching the *padre* to come with her.

"Aye, something has happened in this house," the priest said, as Grazia led them through the hall to the salon.

He had seen nothing, heard nothing; but even in the hall dark vibrations had begun to beat upon him. He knew the feeling. It was a vague intuition of horror. The peasants in the hills, the dwellers in the ruined stone cities, knew it as well as he. When they entered such a house, they said in their strange Ligurian tongue:

"There is a corpse under the floor!"

Grazia answered the *padre's* questions, halting him near the door. She was steady and strong, but she spoke in a strained voice.

"Last night I was in the kitchen. The chauffeur had come in a little while before, and we were talking. I thought my mistress was in her bedroom, and that she might ring for me. We were talking—the chauffeur and I — when we heard voices. One voice was loud and wild. It was the master—the Russian, shouting in his way. It was in the salon. We ran, but we had not crossed the hall when we heard the pistol shot, like that!" Grazia, in her dramatic way, slapped her hands together. "Then—but that was later—we heard a terrible crash. We rushed into the salon. My mistress was lying on the floor. I thought she was dead, but she was breathing, ever so little, as she is now."

"She was alone there?" the *padre* asked.

"No — Mr. Torpichen was with her, kneeling by her side, trying to help her," replied Grazia. "Will you wait in the salon, father?" she added, after a pause. "I'll see if you can go up to her now."

She threw open the door of the salon.

Guido was in the room. As the *padre* and Forbess entered, they saw him first, before they noticed the broken windows and the wreck and confusion. He was sweeping up the shattered glass and what seemed to be fragments and dust of white plaster. He turned swiftly and faced them. His eyes were veiled and suspicious as he glanced from the priest to Forbess and back again.

"What's all this?" the *padre* asked sharply.

Guido masked his face with a look of deep concern.

"It is terrible, father," he said. "There was a quarrel last night — the American, you know."

"Can you understand him?" the *padre* inquired of Forbess.

"Yes—I can follow him."

"Go on, Guido. A quarrel?"

"With the American. His excellency came home somewhat early in the evening, and found them—you understand, eh?—together. He had him turned out of doors. I saw him out myself; but did he go? I know it now—the American did not go. He hid in the garden, and waited."

Guido watched the effect of this statement on the two men. They gave no sign.

"His excellency — the prince — dressed and took his car, and went away. Before he left, he gave me an errand to do in the town. I did not hurry. I did not think he would be home until late. I sat with friends in a wine shop. When I got back to the villa, I met the chauffeur, driving in with a doctor. *Madame* had been shot, they said. That's what I know—since you ask me."

"And it's all you know?"

"Eh? There's also what the chauffeur told me."

"What did he say?"

"He was in the kitchen with the maid, Grazia—her maid, you know. When they heard the shot—for they both heard it—they ran in here, but the chauffeur was first. He only saw the lady. She was alone, leaning there — just there" — he pointed to the tall chair—"but the American came in a second or two. He came from the garden, through those windows, over there. Then *madame* screamed. The chauffeur heard her scream, and he heard what she said to the American."

"Well?"

"'Andrew!' she shouted. 'My God, you have killed him!'"

The *padre* looked searchingly at Guido. The venom in the butler's voice, more than anything else, made him think that this might be true.

"Did Grazia hear her mistress say that?"

"She must have heard," Guido replied; "but what she'll say—"

"I'll have another talk with you later, Guido," the *padre* said musingly. "Leave us now."

When Guido had gone, the old priest turned to Forbess and asked him what he made of it.

"I don't know," the young man answered. His usual calm was broken. "It seems to have been a disgusting brawl between Torpichen and that swine over the woman. I can only see one side of it—it's horrible. If you think of Miss Demdyke and—"

"I know."

"It's the sort of thing—"

Forbess broke off. In his mind he saw little Betty shamed and crushed by this vile scandal—that the man to whom she had given her young, pure love should have degraded himself in this brawl with a barbarian, over the favors of that kind of a woman! It was infamous!

Gradually another thought rose insistent in his mind. This scandal would mean an end of Betty's engagement. Surely it would break the last link that bound her to Torpichen, and leave her free!

Forbess did not as yet know of the interview between the young lovers which had already separated them from each other; so he told himself that he must put that thought away. The one thing he had to do was to keep Torpichen clear of this foul scandal—to keep the pain and shame of it away from Betty. Yes, that was what he had to do for her. It was the right thing.

"It is bad enough," the *padre* said, for he understood what was in Forbess's mind. "You and I must do the best we can to spare Miss Demdyke. We must keep it from her, if possible. I can answer for the servants. They know me," he added grimly. "As for Torpichen—Miss Demdyke is well rid of him."

He sought his young friend's eyes, but Forbess looked away, a new hint of color in his face.

"Yes—we must get Torpichen out of this with as little scandal as possible, for Miss Demdyke's sake," the *padre* continued. "And then—"

Grazia knocked softly at the door, and entered.

"You cannot go up just now," she told the *padre*. "Another physician is there; but what can he do? Oh, father, it's you she needs!"

"Is she conscious?"

"No, father."

"I'll wait."

"The American is coming down to see you."

"Mr. Torpichen?"

"He is with her. All night he has not left her side, kneeling there."

"And Prince Kurokin—is there no word of him?"

"He has not come home." Grazia spoke with sneering contempt. "After the row he ran away." She made a wide gesture, as if space were opening up a path for the runaway. Then she squared away from them, her hands on her hips. "He left her dying on the floor, and took himself off—that's his kind. Oh, no, he has not come back! I've been in his room. I think he's run for it. Some of his clothes are gone—and his dressing bag. He!"

She gesticulated contempt.

The *padre* had another question to ask about Prince Kurokin. It was on the tip of his tongue, but, before he had shaped it to his satisfaction, there came dragging footsteps in the hall, and Torpichen entered the room.

He was haggard of face, with dark hollows under his tragic eyes. He moved very slowly, as if he was infinitely weary; and somehow it seemed to the *padre* that this weariness was spiritual more than physical. His very soul was tired from the long vigil wherein he had tried to beat back the silent death that hovered over the woman he loved.

He looked at the priest, and then at Forbess, like one coming out of a thick dream.

Grazia slipped away and hastened back to the bedside. The *padre* asked for news of Miss Borg.

"Is she conscious?" he inquired gently.

"No."

"She is—is seriously injured?"

"No. The wound is not the worst thing. It is the shock."

"Ah, the shock of—of what happened here—of what she saw," the *padre* said, always gently, "as well as the wound."

"Yes."

"Then you must wait with courage and confidence, Mr. Torpichen," the old priest added.

Torpichen stared at the *padre* dumbly. Save for curt monosyllables, he had hardly spoken. His mind seemed to be wholly in that silent room where Lamia lay. He tried to pull himself together.

"Yes, I know," he said dully; "but perhaps she does not want to live. It may be that. And then—"

"Stop!" the priest exclaimed. "You have no right to say that! Think what it means!"

Torpichen looked up in a startled way.

"You are right," he admitted. "She is not a coward. She is not trying to escape from life."

"What happened here? You are speaking to friends—is he not?"

Forbess assented, for in the face of this man's suffering his anger died away.

"We want to help—that's all."

"I will try to tell you. There is no reason why I shouldn't tell you," Torpichen answered wearily. "Let me sit down. You, too — those chairs, please — not that one, it's the chair she was leaning on. I am quite ready to tell you."

"We have heard Guido's story," the priest remarked.

"Guido?"

"The servant. You left the house early in the evening. Prince Kurokin asked you to go away."

"Yes, I presume that is true."

"But you came back?"

"Yes. I was in the garden, and when he went away I came into this room." Torpichen glanced around as if to make sure, inspecting the broken windows and the plaster scattered over the floor. "Yes, here—and we were talking—she and I were talking. He entered through those windows, from the garden. He was armed. He drew a revolver. She saw him aiming at me, and she threw herself in front of me—with open arms—accepting death, for me—for me! That is what she did. I tried to push her aside, out of death's way, but I was too late. He fired."

"Good God!" cried Forbess, completely shaken out of his usual calm.

"And then?" the *padre* asked, trying to command his voice.

Torpichen was silent—listening, perhaps, for some sound from overhead. He roused himself with a start.

"Then? It wasn't much. He tried to fire again, and—what was it?—there was a bust just at hand—a big thing in plaster—and I hurled it at him. Ha! I hurled it at his head. He howled, and went back, and staggered out through the window—over there. You see?"

Torpichen's voice was increasingly hard, and there was a sort of evil triumph in it. The old *padre* touched him gently on the shoulder.

"Steady!" he said.

"I'm all right."

"Yes, I know."

"What happened to him then, Torpichen?" Forbess inquired. "He did not come back?"

"I don't know, Forbess. You see she—she was there—she was lying on the floor—I thought she was dead—I carried her up to her room—in my arms." Half to himself he repeated: "In my arms!"

"That stuff on the floor," Forbess went on. "It's from the bust, I suppose. There's blood on it, Torpichen."

"Yes."

"A great deal of blood."

"There was blood on his face. I saw it. He screamed like a horse."

"Look here!" The *padre* spoke sharply. "Get your wits together, Torpichen. This house is no place for you. There is nothing you can do for Miss Borg. The doctors and nurses will do everything, and I, by God's grace, will do what I can. Go back to your hotel. Forbess will accompany you. If that man comes again, you must not be here. Think!"

Torpichen heard him to the end. Then he said quietly:

"You are kind, both of you; but I shall not leave her—I shall not leave her—not even though he returns, bringing all the other devils in hell with him!"

"But you can't help her. You are only making it worse and worse," the *padre* urged. "I will stay with her, and in my presence neither the living nor the dead shall harm her. Trust me, Torpichen, it is better that way. You are going, and it is I that shall remain."

The priest was standing over him, dominant, radiating power.

"Yes, you shall stay, father." Torpichen was calm now. "I am grateful, but I shall not leave her."

"And if Kurokin comes?"

"He will not come. Some way or other I seem to know it. He will never enter this house again. No!"

Torpichen had spoken in a low, quiet tone. He was leaning forward in the chair, his eyes fixed on the bloody fragments of plaster at his feet.

"He will not come again," he repeated.

Even as he spoke, outside in the hall were trampling feet and confused voices.

"What's that?" the *padre* exclaimed.

Forbess ran to the door and pulled it open. Guido and four men staggered in, carrying something that sagged and swayed; they lowered it and let it fall heavily to the floor.

"So!" said the *padre,* and he glanced at Torpichen. "He has come again—Prince Kurokin has come home once more! Dead!"

Horribly dead! The body sprawled crookedly on the floor. The face had been viciously battered into shapelessness. Fragments of plaster had been driven into the swollen flesh, and still clung there. The disordered evening clothes, the flaring white shirt front, were foul with earth stains and great patches of drying blood.

Horribly dead! Guido bent over the corpse, gesticulating.

"Look!" he shouted, and tore open the shirt.

There was a bullet wound in the heart.

"Eh?" cried Guido. He drew himself up. "It was murder!"

"Where did you find—it?" the priest asked. He spoke to Guido, but he had not taken his eyes away from Torpichen, who was staring at the crumpled thing on the floor.

"In the ravine—his body had been pitched down the ravine. I didn't find it."

Guido pointed to the four peasants, who had crowded back to the door, and who watched and listened alertly, like forest animals.

"And that?"

It was Forbess put this question. He was looking at one of the dead hands, outstretched and clotted with blood.

" It was like that when they found him," Guido explained.

From the hand one finger had been hacked off. It was the deformed finger on which Prince Kurokin had worn the ring with a great diamond—the ring that could not be removed.

" I'm glad of that," the *padre* observed significantly. He seemed to find a certain measure of comfort in this ghastly mutilation. " The prince was robbed—they got his ring," he added, by way of explanation.

" No! It's murder," declared Guido.

There was a tremor in his voice—a note of fear that had not been there before. The priest turned quickly and faced him. The lackey's heavy face was quivering. Even his hands were tremulous.

" Yes, Guido," replied the old priest gently. " I believe you are right. Yes—it's murder!"

XV

Not a mere vulgar brawl which could be covered up—not a mere scandal which could be hidden. It was murder, red and violent, and the news of it spread through San Remo, and was echoed and reëchoed in newspapers over half the world.

The Russian prince, the light woman, the American millionaire—their names were tossed to the public as worms are thrown into an ant heap.

There was no doubt as to the cause of death. It had been due to that bullet wound in the heart. Mr. Ricci, the examining magistrate, and his medical experts were agreed upon this point. The wounds in the face, atrocious as they were, could not have been fatal. They were attributable only to the malignant savagery of the assassin. It was as if he had stamped the fragments of plaster into the dead face.

The amputation of the crooked finger—with the ring—pointed, as the *padre* had seen, to robbery. There was another indication that robbery had been the motive of the crime. Mr. Ricci found in the prince's bedroom signs of hasty pillage. A gold-fitted bag had been taken—it was valuable; the clothes were missing. Moreover, no money was found on the body, and Kurokin was notoriously a man who carried large sums of money. The pocketbook was gone. All that the magistrate found in the pocket was an old Russian passport and an Italian identity card, with the dead man's photograph pasted on it.

Patiently, sympathetically, Mr. Ricci questioned the people of the house. He was indeed *simpatico,* this large, smiling man, with his plump, ovoid body and beaming face. He was not much of a one for asking questions, but there was a genial receptiveness about him that made it a pleasure to confide in him. Within a few hours he had learned many things—especially about Andrew Torpichen.

There had been that quarrel with Prince Kurokin earlier in the evening, when Torpichen had been virtually turned out of doors. This scene lost nothing from Guido's way of telling it. Moreover, Torpichen had waited in the garden, hidden among the trees in the darkness. When Kurokin left the house, the woman—he noted the name — Lamia Borg, American, aged twenty-two—had secretly admitted Torpichen into the house. He had entered by the window of the salon.

And the prince?

It was Kurokin's chauffeur, Armando, who gave Mr. Ricci an account of his master's journey in the motor car. He had been down to the hotel of the Countess Louvorsky. Precisely — the old Countess Louvorsky; but she had not been at home. Therefore the prince had motored back to the villa. He had got out of the car at the gate, and had sent the chauffeur around to the garage, while he walked up to the house.

So much Armando, the chauffeur, knew; and nothing more—until, while he was sitting in the kitchen, talking with the maid, Grazia, voices and shouts from the salon had reached him. They heard the pistol shot and both ran—he and Grazia—but he was first to reach the door. He had seen the American—that was Torpichen—coming in through the windows from the garden. He had heard Miss Borg cry out—in English. He understood English very well; he had been five years in London. What the lady said was:

" Andrew! My God, you have killed him!"

Grazia, on the other hand, protested that she had heard nothing of the sort. No—she did not understand English. She had heard the revolver shot. She had not seen her mistress supporting herself — clinging to a chair; and she had not seen her fall. When she reached her, she was lying unconscious on the floor.

The magistrate saw clearly enough that Mr. Torpichen was singularly compromised.

There was the quarrel between him and Kurokin, earlier in the evening. There was also the suspicious fact that he had lingered in the garden, waiting until his rival had left the house. Then came his secret meeting with the woman, the unexpected return of the prince, and the fight.

Of what really took place in that salon only two people could now speak — the woman, lying insensible upstairs, and Torpichen himself.

The latter's statement was unvarying. He said that Kurokin had entered from the garden, closed the windows, and fired at him, wounding Miss Borg. In order to prevent another shot being fired, he had thrown the bust. Kurokin, when the bust struck him, had reeled out through the windows. Torpichen, knowing that the man was armed, and fearing that he might fire again, had run out after him, but had not seen him in the dark of the garden. He had hurried back to the salon in time to see Miss Borg fall to the floor.

And that cry from the lips of the woman?

Yes—she had cried out. She had asked if Kurokin had been killed; but he had not been killed—he had fled into the night.

Mr. Ricci accepted this statement quite simply, without attempting to pull it to pieces. An American millionaire—a gentleman, evidently—might very well quarrel with a rival, and, when a revolver was drawn, throw a bust at his head, perhaps even shoot him with his own revolver; but it was inconceivable that he should batter in his victim's face with wanton savagery, hack off a finger to steal a ring, and rob him of his money. That was an impossible supposition.

Torpichen might have killed — yes, the magistrate told himself; but mutilation and robbery? No; that was entirely out of the question.

Mr. Ricci began to suspect that there had been a double crime, one superimposed upon the other. Kurokin might have been killed by his rival, and others, finding the body, might have robbed and mutilated it. That was possible.

Or perhaps the American had told the whole truth. Dazed and wounded, Kurokin had reeled through the window and then stumbled blindly away into the garden, to meet his death at the hands of other men. How? The prince had been killed with his own revolver—at least, Mr. Ricci was almost convinced of this fact. He had found in the salon the bullet which had wounded Miss Borg; and precisely such a bullet had killed the Russian — a similar missile, and probably from the same weapon.

More and more Mr. Ricci was inclined to accept the theory of a double crime, each part independent of the other. He took no action. He did not interfere with Torpichen's freedom. He put no check upon the movements of any one in the house; and yet around the Villa Corinte was drawn a web, impalpable as gossamer. Unseen eyes watched.

Mr. Ricci talked with the *padre*, but the priest was a well of prudence. He had very little to say; only, as the conversation drew toward its end, he remarked casually:

" The servant, this Guido, seems to have been very fond of his master. He is so venomous!"

This gave the magistrate food for thought.

" You know every one, *padre,*" he said. " Tell me, what do you know of this Prince Kurokin?"

" Probably no more than is known to you—just what is known to the police. He was a Russian exile, like the rest of them, only he appears to have been able to escape from Russia with a good deal of his property—jewels, of course; but I understand that he succeeded in transferring to France and Italy a good part of his fortune before the crash came. The old Countess Louvorsky stood sponsor for him, and of course that was enough. She was an old friend of his family."

" Certainly," replied Mr. Ricci. " It was enough if she vouched for him. We've known her here in San Remo for thirty years."

" You know she owns this villa?"

" Yes, and I dare say she can tell us many things we want to learn. I must see the countess as soon as she returns. She has been away, but later—"

Meanwhile the magistrate was learning a good deal about this Russian prince who had been glittering up and down the Riviera for the last few months. He had come to San Remo under the auspices of the Countess Louvorsky, and had installed himself—" and his *amour,*" the magistrate put it—in her villa, while she took refuge in a hotel.

In the police reports Kurokin was noted

as a man of wealth and of high social position in the Russian colony. He often visited Monte Carlo. He frequented the Casino, and played high. He led, indeed, the life that a rich and idle aristocrat usually leads on the Riviera, especially if he is a prince in exile. There was little else to be learned from the police reports, save one thing—Prince Kurokin had an enemy.

An enemy? At least there was a man he feared—a man against whom he had invoked the aid of the authorities.

The prince had not acted directly. He had secured the assistance of the shadowy Russian Embassy in Rome, and of the moribund embassy in Paris. They had sent out to the police a warning against a certain Russian—a criminal of the common law, a Bolshevik, a spy and outlaw—who was hunting Kurokin for his fortune and his life. The pathetic ambassadors of a nation that no longer existed had requested the authorities to lay their hands on this Dimitri — who was not only a spy upon civilization, but was also a criminal seeking personal vengeance upon Prince Kurokin.

Orders had been given. The ports and railway stations had been watched. Exceptional vigilance had been exercised at the frontier of France and Italy, near San Remo. There were rumors that just such an outcast Russian had been prowling near the border, but he was never captured. He had disappeared, leaving no trace. There remained only the reports of the vain search for him, carefully filed away in the police records of many towns.

So far Mr. Ricci's investigation had carried him. He was sitting at a table in the salon of the Villa Corinte, his secretary, a silent effigy of officialdom, at his side.

In a far corner of the room the *padre* sat in a big chair, brooding, his huge black hat on his knees. He had listened without comment to Mr. Ricci's account of what had been learned concerning Kurokin and his enemy. He did not speak, he did not rise, when the door opened and the Countess Louvorsky came in, panting heavily, for she had walked at least a dozen yards. As she looked only at the magistrate, it may be that she did not see the old priest in his remote corner.

The countess was round, white, shining as a peeled bulb. Perfume radiated from her in great oppressive waves.

" Now, Ricci," she began, " here I am!" She sank into a wide chair and filled it.

" I regret, countess—"

" Nonsense, Ricci! Don't talk! Let me get my breath, and I'll do the talking. Nice thing, isn't it, to happen in my house? I thought everything had been smashed to pieces, but it doesn't look so bad," she added, glancing around the room. " Ah, so you are here, *padre?* You would be. Where people are in trouble, you are always on hand. Don't get up! This is no time for formality of that silly sort. Well, Ricci!"

" I should like to ask, countess—"

" Please don't ask me questions, Ricci. I had enough of them in Russia, before I got out, to last me a lifetime. I learned something about questions in Russia. My God! First the question, then the sentence, then—*boum*—death! It's the most dangerous thing on earth, a question. You never know what's behind it. More of us in Russia were hanged by questions than by anything else. Did you ever notice, Ricci, the shape of that thing, the question mark? No? It looks like a gallows from which something should be hanging! No questions, Ricci! I'll tell you what you need to know. This villa is mine. I wish it wasn't! I never did like it, on account of the hill. The hotel is gayer, and I'm nearer the Casino and the tables. I'm fond of play, you know. It's my one amusement. You see, I'm getting ready for old age. Every woman should have the courage to grow old. Thank God, I have it—or shall when the day comes!"

She touched her dyed wig, and a fat, girlish smile appeared on the large surface of the face she had worn for more than sixty years.

Mr. Ricci had made no attempt to check her flow of words. He knew the impossibility of it. He listened with polite patience, hoping to find somewhere in the chaff a grain or two of information.

" Poor Kurokin! To think of his being dead and buried! He was like me — he couldn't keep away from the tables. We Russians are like that. Of course, I knew his family. His mother was an old friend of mine. After he had escaped from Russia, he looked me up in Rome. Indeed, I was glad to see a Kurokin, though I had never met this one since he was a little boy. He was the only one who escaped. His mother was murdered, and his father, the general, was shot by the Bolsheviks. Luckily they had transferred a part of their money to Switzerland and Italy, and Kurokin managed to smuggle out a fortune in jewels. They were his mother's—she had wonderful jewels. And then poor Lamia—it's partly my fault, you know. Kurokin met her at my house in Rome. Think of it! That girl could have married well, if she'd listened to me; but there was the prince, and I think she must have gone mad. Anyway, the silly fool bolted with him. Not that I blame her very much. I am still her friend. I know too much about life to blame a young girl—and think how very young she was—for what has happened to her! Moonlight in the Colosseum! A supper somewhere out of our world, and something smuggled into the wine! Aye, that would be Kurokin's way, for he was a wild devil, wasn't he? And poor Lamia would wake under a strange roof—with hell in her heart. Ah, we poor women!"

She sighed. She looked like a simple old child, all dimples and wickedness.

"I don't know why they couldn't have got married, but that was what they did—bolt. Perhaps Kurokin held off; perhaps it was Lamia. Of course, I let them have the villa; but I knew what would happen. Perhaps it was as well they didn't marry, for what difference would it make now? They weren't made for each other. Wolf and lamb! Perhaps it is a good thing that Kurokin is dead, after all, though of course I'm sorry—for I knew his mother. Lamia repented soon enough, I dare say. She shut herself up here, and Kurokin took to wandering — Monte Carlo, anywhere but here. That was a silly thing they did! Poor Lamia! Now, Ricci, please don't interrupt me!"

Mr. Ricci had been silent throughout, but he apologized.

"I'm afraid it's partly my fault. And then this American—this Mr. Andrew Torpichen—I fear that's my fault, too, though I always act only for the best. You see, when I heard that he was going about with Lamia, I thought trouble might come of it. Kurokin was not a patient man. I thought that if the prince would only come back and make it up with Lamia, everything would be for the best; so I sent him word—"

Even the experienced Mr. Ricci was startled at this amazing confession. The *padre* gave no sign of having heard it. He sat motionless, and stared at the floor.

"Don't blame me! I did it for the best," the countess went on, with her wide, self-approving smile. "I thought it would come out all right, if Lamia and Kurokin were reconciled and the American went back to wherever Americans come from—over there; but it didn't happen that way."

"No," agreed Mr. Ricci, "not quite that way. Countess, will you, at last, permit me a question?"

"Try, Ricci!"

"Kurokin told you of a man—an enemy of his—a Russian—"

"The Bolshevik? Of course, I know all about him. Why didn't you ask me before? The vile wretch! He was brought up on the Kurokin estate. Old General Kurokin, you know, was fond of him. Eh! Eh! I don't talk scandal, but it was understood he was—well, the general's own son—illegitimate, of course. The general pampered him. Then, after all they did for him, he was the one who betrayed them. A dirty Bolshevik! He led the gang of ruffians who murdered Kurokin's mother, and he betrayed his father—gave them up to torture and death—think! The general, who was really this wretch's own father! It was Prince Paul Kurokin whom he hated worst; but Paul escaped with the remnant of the family fortune, and half of the villain's vengeance was balked. He followed the prince — for the Bolshevists let him come abroad to spy for them, and to hunt down his own personal enemy. That's the man," the countess declared vehemently, "who killed poor Kurokin! Don't be silly, Ricci! Who else wanted to kill him—like that—like a butcher? That's the Bolshevist way. Don't tell me! Why haven't you arrested him, instead of worrying everybody else?"

"There is no trace of such a man, countess," Mr. Ricci replied. "He has not been seen—though we were warned against him. The frontiers have been watched with unusual vigilance. He never succeeded in reaching San Remo. It is impossible! There is no evidence that he ever met the prince. And even so, where is he now? He would have as much trouble in getting out of Italy as he would have had to get in. I say again that there is absolutely no trace of such a man."

At that moment there came a blunt knock at the door. It opened, and Grazia came in. Mr. Ricci looked sharply at the intruder, but Grazia, though her eyes were lit with excitement, was quite self-possessed.

She crossed the floor holding out a small packet, roughly wrapped in dirty paper.

"I just found it," she said grimly, "in Guido's room—hidden in his closet."

Mr. Ricci rose. He was always quick to act when the unexpected happened.

"What is it?" he asked quietly.

Grazia thrust the packet into his hands, and then stepped back, her hands on her hips, a look of triumph on her broad face.

Mr. Ricci examined the packet as it lay in his open hand. He was standing near the Countess Louvorsky, and she raised her head to look at it.

"What's that filthy thing?" she asked.

"I don't know as yet," the magistrate replied.

He glanced suspiciously at Grazia. Then, with extreme care, he unfolded the wrapping of dirty paper, and laid bare a blood-stained rag, through which were thrust three long, rusty needles.

The countess shrieked and collapsed in her chair. Her fat hands fluttered around her throat, and she gasped for breath.

"What does it mean?" Mr. Ricci cried. "What is it?"

"My God!" the old woman groaned. "My God! The three needles! The three needles!"

(*To be continued in the January number of* MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE)

BALLADE OF THE GOODNESS OF LIVING

'Tis good to be born and 'tis good to die;
'Tis good to live all the seasons through,
To throw our caps to the morning sky,
And to sit and muse in the evening dew;
To love and to fight and to dare and to do,
Thriftily make and gayly to spend;
'Tis good to meet, good to bid adieu—
Life is all good from beginning to end.

'Twas good to love and all laws defy,
To win—but to lose, though we never knew,
Seems better, perhaps, as the years go by;
Good high impossible dreams to pursue,
To miss them—perhaps that was better, too,
For who shall guess what the gods intend?
Yea, courage and wisdom grew thereby—
Life is all good from beginning to end.

Good to riot and ruffle it, to fly high,
Drink deep, gather roses—*entre nous,*
We went the pace, didn't we, you and I?
But after the roses good was the rue,
And after beauty how good the true!
And this is no sour grapes, perpend—
Quiet at last, and a pipe with you—
Life is all good from beginning to end.

ENVOI

Prince, we have known it all, we two—
The rapture and now the rest, old friend,
The wine of life is a noble brew—
Life is all good from beginning to end.

Richard Le Gallienne

Sledgehammer Pete

THE STORY OF A WINTER NIGHT OF STORM AND STRESS

By William Merriam Rouse

A GUST like a breath of fury racked the battered house of Sledgehammer Peter Smith. Joists creaked and groaned. The whole small structure trembled. Under the door, where the threshold had been splintered when Pete's guests upon a former occasion threw the cookstove out to make more room for dancing, there came a puff of fine, driven snow.

"She's a humdinger to-night!" said little Gig Flanders, with a shiver.

He reached for the pitcher of hard cider, tuned and tempered with alcohol, that sat in the middle of the table. He drank. Then he wiped his mouth with his hand, and the hand upon his trousers.

"She's a blizzard!" wheezed Joe Gouchy.

He also reached for the pitcher, with his great stomach pressing against the table.

"Put some more wood in the stove, Pete!" Black Mike Bell raised his head from between apelike shoulders to speak. Painstakingly he shuffled the cards. "Fill her up while I deal."

Sledgehammer Pete pushed back his chair. He used only his leg muscles to lift his body, placing no hand on table or chair bottom, although he had taken drink for drink with the others through the long evening. His lips were firm. The steel blue of his eyes was unclouded.

He stretched out an arm that filled the capacious sleeve of his flannel shirt, lifted an oak chunk between a thumb and a crooked forefinger, kicked aside the flat top of the box stove, and dropped it in. Sparks and a cloud of smoke soared into the room.

"Come on!" exclaimed Flanders jerkily. "I'm ten dollars in the hole, and I want to get it back!"

Pete nevertheless returned to his chair with deliberation. The fists that had earned him his name gathered up his cards and fanned them out in silence.

It was not surliness, nor even a disinclination to talk, that kept him silent. It was a canon of his meager code, if he could be said to have any at all, not to talk unless he had something to say. This, and the conviction that a man should keep on his feet, were the only two points of conduct, good or bad, about which he had taken the trouble to think during his thirty odd years.

He had made up his mind to draw to a pair of treys, when his quick ear caught a sound that was not of the storm, nor from any one of the three at the table. It was a little human sound, so muffled that it escaped the somewhat deadened hearing of the others.

Pete put his cards face down, and listened. It came again, louder. He half rose. Then the door suddenly opened and flapped in the gale, as a form, snow-crusted from head to foot, fell into the room.

"Hell's bells!" said Pete.

He had dragged the stranger in and closed the door before the others could get up. They leaned over him, peering down, while he worked to dig away snow and ice from the half covered face.

"It's a young un," whispered Gouchy. "Some fool kid!"

"No, it ain't," Flanders told him, with a giggle. "It's a girl, and a darned good-looking one, too!"

So it was. Sledgehammer Pete had pulled off a knitted cap and released a mass of brown curls that framed the wet, pale-lipped face of a girl. She was unconscious, and on her cheeks were the dead white spots that mean the beginning of frostbite. Smith peeled away a long, close-fitting cloak, and worked grimly at overshoes and shoes.

"Get a pan of snow, one of you rummies," he said. "She's nipped. She'd have been froze in ten minutes more."

Black Mike went out. He came back white and cursing, but with a tin pan of snow.

"It ain't fit for a dog to be out," he growled, "let alone a human being!"

With a movement of the arm, Sledgehammer Pete swept aside, bodily, Gig Flanders's attempts to help. Gig's shoebutton eyes fastened upon the girl's bare feet as Smith rubbed and kneaded them with snow. Sledgehammer, annoyed, ordered him to mix some alcohol and hot water for her.

Her eyes opened while Pete was working at her cheeks; but for minutes they stared up at him, out of brown, wide-pupiled depths, without seeing. Not until he held the steaming drink to her lips did she really recover consciousness. Then she struggled up, striking at his hands.

"I've got to go!" she cried. "Oh, help me—please help me!"

Her terrified gaze roved from one to another of the four faces that surrounded her. Of those four faces only that of Peter Smith held her eyes. She seemed to take hold of him with a glance—not as a woman takes hold of a man to shape him to her desires, but as a child takes hold of the strong hand of a strong man.

"Help me!" she repeated softly.

Sledgehammer Pete picked up her shoes and stockings, and handed them to her.

"I've done what was needed," he said. "You're all right. Take a chair by the stove."

"It isn't that!"

She wrung her hands, and made as if to get down from the table. Then she remembered her bare feet, and, with a face blazing scarlet, tugged desperately to put on her damp footwear.

Gig Flanders snickered. Joe Gouchy heaved himself around in front of her, and searched her face with the gossipy curiosity that some fat men have.

"Who might you be, anyway?" he asked.

"Adèle Varney," she replied.

She drew back, instinctively turning toward Smith, and slid down from the table on the side toward him. Then she walked around to the stove.

"Ol' Henry Varney's girl—over Bayport way," volunteered Black Mike.

She looked up and nodded in silence.

"How might you come to be here?" demanded Gouchy.

"I—" For a moment a torrent of sobs choked back her words. "I came to the Bakerville station—on the train—to meet some one. He wasn't there, and—"

Joe Gouchy smirked, and winked at Flanders.

"Here's us," he said.

"You walked up the mountain road from the Bakerville station?" asked Smith.

"Yes—the station was closed, and I started to look for a house."

"Who was you going to meet there?" Black Mike Bell sent a staccato oath with the question. "Nobody but a fool kid or a drunk would 'a' got off at Bakerville to-night!"

At his bullying she gave up her last barrier. The slope of her shoulders as she sank lower in her chair, the drooping of her head, the very tone in which she spoke, told that storm and disappointment, and the men in that room where fate had tossed her, had beaten her down.

"I'm going to marry Charley Drew," she said, looking at the floor. "That is, I guess I am. I took the train south to Bakerville to fool father. Charley was going to meet me there and take me north on the sleeper—to Plattsburg. We were to get married to-morrow."

Joe Gouchy chuckled at the grinning Flanders. Even the saturnine mouth of Black Mike curled. Sledgehammer Pete alone was not amused.

"Who's Drew?" he asked.

Gig Flanders answered him, with a sneer.

"Oh, he's a kind of dude—goes to prayer meeting so he can take a girl home, and don't drink no licker."

"Well," said Pete, "the girl's got to stay here to-night."

"Sure!" agreed Gig.

"I can't!" she cried.

For the moment fright swept away her other miseries.

"It's stay here or die," said Sledgehammer Pete, in a tone that somewhat lessened the force of his ultimatum. "There ain't another house on this side of Crowquill Mountain, and you couldn't get to Bakerville village alive to-night, not even if one of us was to go with you."

She buried her face in her hands. Then, as if she had reached the nadir of her suffering, and was again upon the upward way, she flung her head back and looked at Smith out of eyes become steady and velvet soft.

"All right!" she said. "I'm much obliged to you."

"You can have the room over this one," he told her, going to get a lamp. "The stovepipe goes through there, and the bed's got plenty of blankets."

She gathered up her cloak and followed him. The room was Smith's own, bare but clean. He put the lamp down upon a wooden-bottomed chair — there was no other furniture except the bed—and turned to leave.

"Good night," said Adèle Varney. "And thank you!"

Sledgehammer Pete did not answer, for the reason that he did not know exactly what to say. He had done no more than he would have done for any man or beast as a matter of course, and he was not used to little courtesies.

Up to that moment he had been mildly irritated. Now he was rather pleased with her. She had some sand, after all. The few women he knew had courage, or the appearance of it. Yes—they had courage, and some of them the ability to outcurse and outdrink a lake boatman.

II

When Pete entered the kitchen, Black Mike was gathering up the cards for a new deal. The cider pitcher had been filled again—which meant that it had been emptied again—and the fat, red lips of Joe Gouchy were bright from a fresh drink. They were as bright as the hard eyes of Gig Flanders.

With Black Mike it was different. As always, his face grew dull and slack, but not as an indication that his strength was less. As he became drunk, he became a peril.

Sledgehammer Pete knew each most intimate trait of the other three, and held those traits to be none of his business. What was it to him that Black Mike Bell had killed a man at the end of a party such as this? If Pete could not stand on his feet and fight, then he might expect heavy heels to tread his face. He could take care of himself. If trouble came, it would be between Flanders and Bell; for Gig might deal from the bottom of the pack to Black Mike, deceived by an apparently clouded eye.

The checkers which they used for chips grew in front of Smith. Bell's head sank lower between his shoulders, and a scowl knotted his forehead. Flanders, and even the voluble Gouchy, became silent as they also were caught in the steady drift of luck toward Pete. Jokes about the girl, with which Gig and Joe Gouchy had at first amused themselves, were forgotten now.

It was Black Mike who broke the tension, even as the eyes of Flanders were considering whether or not he was far enough removed from watchfulness. At the winning of a jackpot by Smith, he pushed back from the table and struck it a blow that set the checkers jigging. He cursed, calling upon all the powers he knew to deal with his luck. He cursed himself, the game of poker, and even the blizzard.

"You quit playing?" asked Gouchy, when Bell began to repeat himself.

"Yes!"

"Then I quit, too, while I got something left!"

And Joe, shoving his checkers to Flanders to cash in, applied himself anew to the now many times refilled pitcher.

"Maybe I better lay off myself," said Flanders.

Reluctantly, as banker, he drew forth a wad of dirty bills and gathered in the chips. Under the unwinking eyes of Sledgehammer Pete, he paid in full. Then he leaned back in his chair, leering, and said words that were as an electric spark to the mine already laid and waiting.

"Who gets the girl?"

III

Without doubt, in the back of the minds of Gouchy and Black Mike, there had already been thoughts of this nature. The mind of Sledgehammer Pete, however, had been a blank in the matter. He very seldom thought of more than one thing at a time. Up to that instant the object of his concentration had been poker. Now it had become the girl; but he did not speak first.

"Me—I guess I'm willing!" grinned Gouchy.

Black Mike Bell rose up and stood, rock like, upon his thick legs. He had a strategic position, with no one between his back and the wall, and a chair easy to hand.

"I get her!" he growled, as his dead eyes half closed.

The glance that Gig Flanders gave him denied this, but the little man did not say anything in contradiction. He did not even shift in his chair, but Smith saw his right hand move slightly toward a pocket. It would be like Flanders to carry a knife for fighting purposes.

Sledgehammer Pete cleared his throat and spoke.

"To-morrow's coming," he said. "This girl has got a feller, and a family. Do you all want to have to go into the woods, and stay there?"

"Bah!" Joe Gouchy snapped his fingers. "I'll take her up to my place and keep her there all winter. Nobody see her come here!"

Sledgehammer Pete's objection had not been convincing, and he knew it. Some silent voice within had told him that the girl should be allowed to go in peace, he did not know why.

"Let's deal a hand all around, to see," said Flanders, and he reached for the cards.

"No!"

Black Mike reached out a paw and cuffed the pack into a fluttering shower.

The cards settled over the table and floor. The tin clock on the shelf behind the stove ticked away a score of seconds. A blast set the windows rattling.

The hand of Gig Flanders came creeping out of his pocket with an almost imperceptible movement. When it was free and clear, his thumb pressed the spring of a big clasp knife, and a five-inch blade snapped back and locked.

Black Mike Bell swung the chair over his head. It came down in a sweeping, well struck blow that was calculated to catch Flanders whichever way he dodged. It would have put him ten feet away, if it had landed; but Gig dropped forward, catlike, upon his stomach; and catlike he rose up, with the knife blade driving home in the exposed side of Black Mike Bell.

The force of the blow carried them both staggering against the door. Flanders leaped away. The chair dropped from the grasp of Black Mike, and his knees buckled under him. It was not necessary for little Gig Flanders to strike again.

As Flanders jumped back, he had half turned, so that he could command a view of them all—the dying man and the two living.

Joe Gouchy was standing up now, with a drawn and serious look upon his fat face. He held a sizable stick of stove wood in each hand, and he also was placed so that he could watch the others.

Sledgehammer Pete had not moved from the chair where he sat with his iron hands resting upon the edge of the table.

He saw a little movement of Gig Flanders's head in his direction, and he read that movement as easily as if it had been large print. It conveyed to Gouchy an invitation to combine for the finishing of him, Pete Smith, before they settled their own contest.

It was clever work on the part of Gig. He could offer to let the cards decide between him and Gouchy, still retaining the possibility of being able to stab the other men in the back if he lost.

Joe Gouchy accepted with his eyes. Then Sledgehammer Pete did the thing he had determined to do at the right moment. He lifted the table, rushed it forward as an improvised shield, and with it overwhelmed Gouchy, driving him backward over the stove.

Pete spun lightly upon the ball of one foot, and with the same movement he kicked. His leg was longer than the stabbing arm of Gig Flanders. His heavily shod foot sank into the stomach of the little man and stretched him, sick and twitching, among the scattered cards.

Then Smith turned upon Gouchy, and met him as he was coming on with a swinging club. For that Pete cared little. The blow grazed his head and smashed down upon his shoulders. He grinned a little as he drove his fist into the face that sprang to meet it. Half a dozen times he struck, each time with the sound of a cracking board.

Sledgehammer Pete stood in the middle of the room, and considered the three fallen men. Two of them still held possibilities of danger, but Bell was dead. Pete took a snarl of rope from a closet, and with it tied Flanders and Gouchy. Then he dragged all three out of the way, and set the table back in its accustomed place.

Again he stood in the middle of the room, and meditated. He lifted his head toward the cracked and blackened ceiling. Up there was the girl.

He took a drink of cider. Slowly, with his head half bowed, he mounted the stairs and turned the knob of her door.

The lamp had been turned low, so that its small circle of radiance covered only a limited area. It touched and dwelled gently upon Adèle Varney, who knelt beside the bed with her head buried in a pillow. At the sound of the opening door she looked up, so that the light played full upon her face. It flowed through her tangled curls, and they became a misty aura. Her eyes met steadily the gaze of Sledgehammer Pete.

He stood still. An emotion took hold of him. It was an emotion which was able to dispossess all those of the night, even to the latest of them all.

He knew this emotion well, but it was rare enough with him, and hitherto he had never known it in connection with a woman. To him it had come when he stood at sunrise upon some high granite outcrop, and looked over the blue, billowing vastness of the mountains; or in the whispering night, when he gazed up at the bright myriads which he had heard were other worlds.

"By God!" breathed Sledgehammer Pete. "If anybody touches you, I'll smash him!"

He went back down the stairs.

IV

BEFORE the late winter dawn came, Smith had removed the two living men and the dead man to another room, and had done his rough best to set the kitchen in order. When the girl had been looked after, he would kick Gouchy and Flanders out, and would make them take Black Mike Bell with them. It was directly against the right conduct of the mountains to call in the sheriff. If he came, that would be another matter.

Pete ate breakfast. Then he fried more salt pork and potatoes, and went up to the girl's room and knocked.

"Breakfast is all ready," he said. "I'm alone, so you needn't be afraid to come down and eat."

She followed him to the kitchen and sat in the place he indicated. He saw that her eyes were dark-ringed, and that she was pale; but, however little she had slept, there had come back to her the natural strength of the country-bred girl.

"You fought for me last night," she said.

Pete Smith felt the blood surge to his face. He was confronted by his first intricate problem of the false and the true. He rubbed the ear that had been raked by Joe Gouchy's club as he sought for an answer.

"Well," he replied slowly, "the others started it."

"I shall tell Charley what you did!" She smiled up at him gratefully. "I must find Charley to-day."

Sledgehammer Pete sat down with a suddenness that threatened his chair. He had forgotten all about this Charley Drew. Now Pete realized that he had saved her for another man—saved her from a wolf and a pig, and from himself, in order that she might belong to Drew.

Drew was a housebroken man, and probably spent the good daylight hours under a roof. If Pete let the girl go, he would never see her again.

Here another emotion entered into the soul of Sledgehammer Pete, and this time it was something new, and something bigger than anything he had ever known. He did not know in words that love gives and lust takes, but he did feel that the girl must be happy. It would run a knife into him, as the knife had gone into Black Mike, to see her suffer. He wanted her to have what she wanted. He did not understand how it could be Drew. Any one of the women whom Pete knew would have been his for that fight alone. It was queer!

"I'll go get Charley Drew for you," said Pete, and he went about getting ready. "You'd better stay here. I don't know where I'll find him, and your father might be looking for you."

V

IT was at the Bakerville station that he found Drew. Pete recognized him by the inquiries the young man was making of the agent. He got him outside with a wink and a nod, and they stood upon the platform, not yet clear of the blizzard drifts, and looked each other over.

Sledgehammer Pete saw a man somewhat younger than himself, clad in a long, fur-lined coat and a sealskin cap. Drew's lips were thin, and his eyes were cold with the coldness of men who, for instance, keep a store and refuse to trust a man for a sack of flour in winter time. This was no trifler who would fool with Adèle Varney, but not in a hundred years could Smith have called him friend.

"Miss Varney, she's up at my place," he said.

"Your place?" snapped Drew. "Where's that, and who are you?"

"I'm Pete Smith, from Crowquill. She got caught in the blizzard last night, and 'most froze."

"She ought to have known better than to come out! I did. The sensible thing was to wait."

"Well," said Pete, "I don't call it sensible to fall in love, but folks do. You'd better come along with me and get her. I was looking for you, and I brought an extry pair of snowshoes."

"All right," agreed Drew.

From then until they reached Smith's weather-beaten, half buried house Charles Drew did not speak. He made heavy going of it, with his long coat and the softness of the new snow, but at least he forbore to complain.

The door opened to them almost before they had had time to kick off their snowshoes, and Adèle, joyous, laughing, stood upon the broken threshold with her arms held out to Drew.

"Charley!" she cried. "Oh, I'm so glad you've come!"

In silence he stepped into the room and held her at arm's length. He held her by the shoulders, and searched her eyes. He searched them until the light died out of them, and in its place came a questioning.

"Adèle," said Drew, "I want to know just what happened."

She backed away from him then, her arms hanging at her sides; but she told him how she had come to the house, and how Peter Smith had fought for her.

Drew, when she had finished, turned to Sledgehammer Pete and looked him up and down speculatively.

"What have you got to say?" he asked.

"I say," Pete told him, with anger rising like a mountain stream in spring, "that you'd ought to be hamstrung for not being at Bakerville station last night, come hell or high water!"

"Nobody but a crazy man would have got off a train there last night, with the station closed. What I want is the truth about this. I don't see any signs of a fight. It looks mighty queer to me that Adèle should get 'way up here, when Bakerville village is nearer to the station!"

"Was you out at all last night?" asked Pete.

"Of course not!"

"All right, then! You don't know that a man couldn't see six feet ahead of him."

"Well, what about this story of a fight?"

"I can prove that—"

"Stop!" Adèle Varney struck Pete's arm with her clenched fist. "You won't prove anything! He'll believe me now, or he'll never have another chance! At home they know me, thank God!"

Drew ran his tongue between his thin lips and wetted them. His jaw muscles twitched, and the pupils of his eyes reduced themselves to mere points. Sledgehammer Pete knew that he did not believe, and never would. He knew that the man was calculating and weighing the value of the girl.

"Smith," said Drew, at length, "can you keep still about this—if it's worth your while?"

Up to that hour Sledgehammer Pete had always thought rather ill of himself, except as a fighter. Now a great and clean feeling filled him so that he seemed like to burst with it. His head snapped up and his iron fists clenched.

"Get out of here!" he roared. "You ain't fit to touch her!"

Drew made the mistake of trying to speak. Pete caught him by the fur collar of his coat with one hand, opened the door with the other, and hurled him into the snow. Then he turned back and faced the girl, standing against the door to prevent the possibility of Drew tempting him again.

"I'm going to take you home," he said.

"Yes!"

She smiled at him.

"I'll leave you before we get in sight of your house."

"No!" The smile in her eyes grew deeper. "You'll go all the way! Father likes a man like you!"

THE SONG OF THE CHARITABLE PLUTOCRAT

Of this world's goods so much I own
That plutocratic I have grown;
I have the hills, the sun, the dew,
And, best of all my treasures, you!
I'm very sorry for the poor,
But I won't give them *all* my store;
I'll share the hills, the sun, the dew,
But I shall keep sole claim to you!

Mary Carolyn Davies

Challenge

THE STORY OF A PAINTER, HIS MODEL, AND THEIR PICTURE

By Mella Russell McCallum

THE iridescent stream of models that had flowed through Neilsen's life meant no more to him than his palette, his easel, his colors. The big, blond artist was always impersonally courteous to them, just as he was impersonally courteous to the society matrons who tried to lionize him. Men found him a delightful friend, but women—they found him not at all. His work was his love.

One summer he and Hendricks had a shack in Maine together. They painted the sea and the rocks and the coast. They hired some fisher folk to pose for them.

One of Neilsen's sketches—a girl in coarse, dark clothes, looking at the sea—turned out rather well. Hendricks predicted greatness for the finished product; but Neilsen said he didn't intend to finish it. He had a different idea.

" I don't want to do a stupid figure in a sea setting," he said. " I want to do a girl—a gay young girl, in a bright blue shift, poised on that rock, with arms outstretched to the water—youth challenging the sea. Only a very young thing dares to challenge an old, wise, cruel thing like the sea, you know. The rest of us know better."

Hendricks nodded.

" She must be not only young, but beautiful, and extremely gay. A dancing pose, no heavier than a snowflake. Abandon—absolutely. There's nothing like youth, Hendricks! It comes once, slips—and is gone. Nor saint nor science can bring it back; and that's what I want to catch."

Hendricks nodded again, and grinned at Neilsen's " poetry."

" I can do it, too. The figure must be all blue and white lightness — crystalline, yet soft, too—the height of innocent gayety. A light brunette, I think, for I've set my heart on a certain bright, dark blue for the draperies—a barbaric blue."

" In other words, you want a Broadway model, Class A, type so-and-so, to pose on a slippery rock on the Maine coast. Well, it can't be done. Pickings are too good in New York. You'd have to be a millionaire!"

" I know that," Neilsen sighed; " but I'm going to do it, somehow. The brightest of blue seas—the lightest of blue girls. I want to call it ' Challenge.' If I succeed, you won't be able to tell which one of them is going to win out."

" The old, wise, cruel thing always wins!"

Neilsen paid no attention to the cynic.

" I'll do several studies of this girl here, facing the way I want. I can refer to them for light."

He set to work. He made careful sketches of the sea, also, for he had decided to paint the real picture entire in his New York studio. Then he was eager to go back to the city.

Hendricks wanted him to stay. There were some girls staying up the coast a little way who were willing to make things pleasant for two unattached men.

Neilsen snorted at that. The only girl he could think about was the spirit of youth in a blue shift. He arrived in New York at the end of August.

He interviewed several models immediately. One was too blond. One was too statuesque. One had lovely, childish features, and the right coloring, but she couldn't hold a dancing pose. She was a good-natured girl, and tried to help him.

" Why don't you try Aimée? She's had ballet work, and she's a medium brunette. She's broke now, too."

" Why is she broke?"

" She was with a musical road show this summer, but they didn't take her on again when they signed them up for winter."

" Why didn't they sign her up?"

The girl shrugged.

"Too many parties after the show, I guess."

"What do I want of her, then, if she's not steady? I'm looking for a model to pose for me alone for several weeks—possibly months. I'll pay her well, but she can't cut up on the job."

"Oh, Aimée'll be all right now. The wind's out of her sails. She'll be a regular dray horse for a long time."

Neilsen frowned.

"I ought not to have told you this, if you're going to be hard on her. I have a lot of sympathy for Aimée. She's had a raw deal handed her. Her father's in Sing Sing. Shot her mother. There was another man. You can't expect a girl to come up like a lily with a start like that, can you? Aimée isn't a bad sort, honestly."

"Well, you might send her around," assented Neilsen doubtfully.

He fussed about for the rest of the day. He caught up with his correspondence, and supplemented his janitress's sketchy cleaning by digging out corners. At times, Neilsen took pride in his housekeeping.

He didn't want to start painting until he could begin studies for "Challenge." He didn't want to fritter away on anything else the fine eagerness that held him.

The studio looked neat and bare. When he was working, it was different—he threw things everywhere. He didn't keep a social studio. He never gave teas. No woman had ever set foot in it, save those tools of trade, the models.

II

THAT evening Aimée came.

He knew at once that he wanted her. She was dressed as thousands of flappers were dressed that summer, in a short white skirt and a colored, low-necked sweater. It was a blue sweater—not the shade he had in mind for the picture, but sufficiently like it to make him sure that she would suit the right blue. Her face was adorably childish.

"Bab said you wanted a model."

"I do. Will you stand over there by the window, please? Take off your hat. Turn, so that I can get the profile. Raise your arms."

Aimée did as she was told, and something else—she poised on the toes of one foot, and didn't wabble. It looked to be natural grace, but Neilsen knew it was largely the muscle control of dance technique.

"That will do."

He was exulting inwardly. Her hair wasn't bobbed, thank God! It was brown and blowy. Her eyes were gray, and looked unnaturally large, because of the mascara on her lashes. He would make her leave that off. The features were the thing—eager, young. Her color wasn't as high as he wished. Aside from the mascara, she had had sense enough to use no make-up. Her skin was cream-smooth.

"Sit down, please. Now listen—I don't want to hire any model who won't stay until I'm finished."

"I see. I'll be steady, all right."

"And I don't want her to work for any one else. I'll pay her so well that she won't need to. She must rest a lot, and take brisk walks, and eat beefsteak, and drink milk. Your color ought to be better."

Aimée fidgeted, then giggled.

"Would I have to go to bed at eight o'clock?"

Neilsen raised his chin.

"If necessary."

Then they talked about pay, and he offered her sixty dollars a week. She was startled, and didn't try to conceal it.

"It's cert'nly awf'ly kind of you, Mr. Neilsen!"

"Not kind at all. I expect you to take care of your health for me. It's just business." He did smile, however, his kind, impersonal smile. "Can you start to-morrow at nine?"

She promised, and tripped away.

Neilsen was pleased with himself. He went across the hall, banged at Adam Beith's door, and dragged him away from his etchings. They went to the Brevoort to dine. He told Beith about Aimée.

"I know the girl." Adam blinked through his glasses. "My young nephew has a studio in the Charington. I saw her there once. A beautiful child!"

"Not only looks young, but is young," exulted Neilsen. "Seventeen. Hear anything about her?"

The Scotsman laughed.

"Only that she runs true to form, I'm afraid. Too much night life!"

Neilsen scowled.

"The usual complaint! Well, I've engaged her to work solely for me, and if her word's any good—"

"Word—word! Has a butterfly a word? Look for the worst, man; then you won't be disappointed."

"She can't fail me. I've a feeling that she can't."

"Ah, well, well, don't borrow trouble. Perhaps she won't."

III

Aimée came at nine o'clock the next morning, and they set to work at once. Neilsen told her to rest when she felt the need of it, as he was apt to forget.

She held the pose extremely well, he found. Apparently she had no nerves. He made line drawings of her head, her hand, her foot. At eleven he told her to go and take a brisk walk, eat a good lunch, and come back at one. She could rest on the studio couch, if she wished; but he thought it would be better if she stayed out in the air.

He himself followed no such program. He brooded over the sketches until she returned. He was delighted with his beginning. He told himself that he would make a more thorough study of her than he had ever done before. He would paint her in a thousand poses, if need be, before he set brush to the real picture.

That afternoon he made a figure drawing. Her body was immature, but it was what he wanted—young and thin, but not too thin. Again he adjured her to walk and eat, and to rest a lot before to-morrow. He wasn't afraid of her overeating, for she hadn't an ounce of spare flesh.

Thus the work went on. Aimée came punctually and behaved perfectly. She never seemed to be tired. She never complained. Her color improved.

Neilsen questioned her about her diet, and found that she was eating chops and steak, and drinking milk. Beyond that, he seldom talked to her. It wasn't his way. She was one of his tools, to be treated with care—that was all.

One day he brought in an armful of blue silk stuffs. Aimée squealed over them. One length that she admired—and that he rejected—he gave her. She said she was going to make a party dress of it.

"Just straight, with straps, and a girdle," she explained.

"All right; but no late parties, mind! You're just beginning to get the color I want you to have."

She pouted a little, but he ignored that, and went on trying the effect of the various blues against her. Finally he chose the one he would use. It was bluer than the sky in high, cold altitudes—an exotic blue sometimes found in Chinese embroidery.

He folded the rest, to be returned to the dealer. Aimée wrapped up the length he had given her.

A month passed, and the studio became filled with studies of the girl. Neilsen was anxious to begin the final piece, but he held himself back. He wanted the drawing of her to be second nature to him.

One morning, as he tried a profile with her chin at a different angle, he saw that there were rings under her eyes.

"Been wearing the new gown, haven't you?"

"Oh, yes, and it's grand! Every one fell for it."

He went on painting. Suddenly her pose collapsed. She tried to capture it again, and wabbled.

"You aren't well. Let's stop."

If she had been ill from legitimate reasons, she would have accepted his offer of a rest; but she braced herself.

"I'm all right, I tell you!"

Then Neilsen understood.

"You'd better go home to bed," he said, throwing down his brush.

Without a word, she went out to the dressing room. When she came back, ready for the street, she was very meek.

"Shall I come back after lunch?"

"No—not till to-morrow."

He didn't turn around. She opened the door to go. A panic came to him. She might not come back to-morrow!

"Aimée!"

"Yes, Mr. Neilsen?"

"I didn't mean to be cross. I was disappointed—that's all. You won't fail me in the morning, will you? If you aren't up to it, telephone me."

"Of course I won't fail you." A tear rolled over one of her lids. She twisted about, and swallowed. "I—I'm awf'ly sorry, Mr. Neilsen, but—but I hadn't had any fun in God knows how long, and—you see, Hortense's friend has a college chum in town, and—and we went out to a place to dance, and—I had a little too much to drink."

Neilsen said nothing. His ideas on such things were a generation back. He didn't want to discuss it with her. At the same time, it rather touched him to have her admit it.

"Well, please don't do it again," he said finally.

"I was afraid you'd let me go for good, if you found out."

"For good!" He swept a hand in the direction of the sketches. "Do you think I'd let you go now, after making all those?"

"I'm awf'ly glad! I told that fellow those high balls had a terrible kick."

"Have you another date with him?"

"Y-yes, but it's for Saturday night, and we don't work Sundays. Anyhow, I'll be careful."

Neilsen sighed.

When she had gone, he sat down and stared around. Hundreds of sketches of that girl! Any one of them was salable as it stood. He knew they were good. Beautiful, lithe young Aimée! He was putting her into the best work he had ever done. He hoped, modestly, to immortalize her a little; and she could go out and drink too many high balls with somebody's college chum!

He felt a destructive mood descending upon him. He feared that mood; so he turned his back on the studio, clapped on his hat, and went out. He had a vague idea of going off somewhere to think.

He took the subway to One Hundred and Twenty-Fifth Street, and ferried to New Jersey. He rode on a trolley car to the top of the Palisades. Leaving the highway, he scrambled down the cliff and through undergrowth until he came to a comfortable ledge of rock.

Here he sat down and lighted his pipe. The October woods, the mild air, softened him. There was a violet-gold haze over the Hudson and Manhattan.

He was an artist, he told himself — an artist of worth. He had worked hard. If he should die to-day, his loss would be mourned in circles that he admired. Some of his work, he thought, would live.

And now he was doing his best. He knew it. It was one of those things a man is sure of—like his mother; yet, in doing this, he was dependent on a brainless little butterfly.

He couldn't go on with "Challenge" without Aimée. If he should take another model now, all the work would have to be done over; and he couldn't do it over.

He could never find another model like Aimée. Her beauty had become a part of him. He had done her in every pose, with every medium he could command. He hadn't the slightest personal interest in her, yet she was a part of his life. Damned queer, how steel could be yoked to a feather!

He thought of her side of the question. Bab had said that Aimée had grown up under a cloud. She had no schooling. She had no intellect. Her best sphere of usefulness, aside from posing, would be to marry some nice, stupid boy, and raise babies; but beautiful Broadway models do not have to take up with steady, stupid boys. There are too many brilliant youths, of money or "family," ready to give them a good time.

What would the end be for her? Not nice, he thought. She could go on posing, using make-up more and more freely, for some years. For figure work she could go on indefinitely. Then—no, the end would not be nice.

No brains! No sense! A feather! Yet he, a man of steel worth, was dependent on her.

It did him good to think it over out there in the woods, even if he came to no conclusion. He realized that he had been working indoors too steadily.

IV

The next morning Aimée was beautifully penitent. She looked tired, however. He wondered if she ever got a real healthy outing.

"Ever go picnicking, Aimée?" he asked her.

"I went on an automobile picnic one Sunday in August."

"H-m! With thermos bottles, and a past-midnight ride down Broadway, eh?"

"Why, how did you know?"

Neilsen smiled.

"Will you go on a fresh-air picnic with me next Sunday? Oh, I forgot—you have a Saturday evening engagement."

"I'm not going to keep that date, Mr. Neilsen. I called that fellow up. I got to thinking, you were so decent not to bawl me out—and what if I didn't get around here all right Monday? But I didn't know you ever went out with a model."

"I don't. It 'll be like going out with your father."

"Not like going out with *my* father, it won't! You prob'ly heard about my old man."

"I'm sorry I said that. I mean that a fresh-air tramp in the woods will do you good. I'll take a lunch, and there'll be coffee in the thermos bottle."

Aimée laughed.

"Oh, you're so funny, Mr. Neilsen!"

"Do I understand that you accept?"

"Sure! I'd love to go."

Afterward, he had his qualms. How could he keep her from attaching sentimental interest to the excursion? And if she didn't, her mates would. She would tell them. She might even boast. Many artists met their models socially, he knew.

Well, the thing was done. He was going picnicking with a seventeen-year-old girl. How Adam Beith would laugh!

He packed a lunch of sandwiches, none too dainty, but nourishing, and brewed a quart of coffee, adding plenty of cream and sugar to the thermos bottle. He was to meet Aimée at the ferry.

She looked the youngest thing on earth. He wished she hadn't worn a silk dress. Her small black velvet hat made her look still younger, by its sophistication. She had on French-heeled slippers.

They scrambled about the woods for a time; but the French heels were no good for that, and she seemed relieved when they came to the ledge of rock that he had found the other day. Neilsen tried to talk, but they had nothing to talk about. They ate their lunch, reserving half for later, and he produced a popular magazine he had bought in the ferry house. She seized upon that eagerly.

She sat facing the river, her knees drawn up to her chin, poring over the pictures of movie actresses. He wanted to sketch her in a new light and a new scene; but he hadn't brought her out here to pose. He kept his hand away from his pencil, and watched her.

After a time she flung the magazine down petulantly. She had none of that tenderness which the lover of books bestows on the meanest printed page.

"Oh, but a person gets tired reading!" she yawned. "The little old town looks good from here, don't it?"

"Yes."

"It's a great town. I'd hate to have to leave it. I've had some good times there, all right! I tell you, I was homesick for it when I was out on the road; but I guess it wouldn't miss me any."

"Oh, yes, it would! It's the art center of the country, you know."

"I never trail much with artists, Mr. Neilsen. They're either—you know—or else they're like you, and let us alone."

"I don't mean that. I mean that you're doing such a service for art."

She turned around and grinned.

"Go on!"

"Think of the pictures that give pleasure to people. They all had to have models, except the landscapes. An artist couldn't learn to paint without a model."

Aimée was silent.

"Didn't you ever think of it in that way? You give something to art that no one else can—your beauty. You think of it as just earning your living, and so it is—just as the money I receive for pictures is my living; but it's more than that."

"I had an artist talk that way once before to me. He was drunk. I didn't take no stock in it; but you—my God, you'll have me throwing bouquets at myself next!"

"Throw all you like; but remember, it isn't just for me—it's for art. You'll be posing for other serious work, too—pictures that will be finer than mine, I don't doubt."

"You talk so queer, it scares me—as if I had a—a duty!"

"I'm not sure but you have; but after a few years I'd like to see you marry some nice fellow, and settle down."

Aimée squared her shoulders, and shook her head hard.

"Not for mine! I saw all the married life I want to before I left home!"

"But what will you do?"

"I can take care of myself!"

"But, child—"

"I should worry about the future! I'll manage."

"You can't go at things that way, Aimée. You've got to have some plan."

"That girl in 'Challenge'—has she a plan?"

"Nonsense! That's different." Yet he knew it wasn't different. "Well, anyway, don't forget that you have a mission now, and a fine one. Shall we eat the rest of our lunch?"

"Say, I want to get your sermon straight. Am I doing a—a service for you, or for 'Challenge'?"

"For art."

"For 'Challenge,' you mean."

And because he saw that she liked the concrete, he let it go at that.

V

On the whole, Neilsen was rather pleased with the excursion. The girl had breathed pure air perforce, and perhaps she had found a mental peg to tie to; but her utter lack of intellectual compensations made him uneasy. How long could she remain steady?

He had better get at his final canvas. He was ready for it now.

It went fast. He knew his subject so perfectly that he didn't have to strain for effect. Hendricks, looking over his shoulder, whistled. A too gay sea, with a hint of malice under its joy. The girl in blue, laughing, daring the mocker. The canvas measured three and a half by four feet.

But Neilsen wasn't quite satisfied. He didn't know why. The girl was gay and confident. The sea was gay and confident. What more did he want?

"It's almost done, isn't it?" Aimée asked.

She took great interest in the work. She had never before posed so long for one thing.

"I suppose it is," Neilsen said. "Then what, for you?"

She shrugged, and flung out her arms in a yearning gesture.

"Then, for me—one—good—time! One of Hortense's friends is going to give us a house party. They're holding it up, waiting for me to get done here. It's a swell place, fifty miles up the river, with a dance hall and a billiard room and a wine cellar. The fellow's mother is in England, and the servants are away on their vacation."

"You're too young for such parties."

"Well, I've got to do something, haven't I? You can't say I haven't been steady lately."

"You've been an angel."

"Yes—a jack-in-the-box angel, ready to bust out!"

The day came soon when Neilsen declared that he could do no more to the picture. He wasn't satisfied, but he could do no more. The sea was well enough—he could see that; but the girl—was her confidence slightly superficial, where he had intended it supreme? It must be the challenge of ignorance—for what else would challenge the sea?—but it must be absolute, and he hadn't made it so. There was a hint of Aimée's own cynicism in his girl.

He wheeled the easel to the far end of the room, and pushed everything else to one side. Aimée, still in the blue drapery, clasped her hands.

"It sort of makes me think of church, Mr. Neilsen, up there in the end of the room. I could get down and worship it, honestly!"

"I think I have prayed to it right along," said the artist, smiling. "I have prayed to it to be good work."

"Is it art, Mr. Neilsen?"

"I hope so, but it isn't all I wanted it to be."

Aimée looked puzzled. She gazed at it several seconds longer.

"And now you're finished with me!"

"Yes—finished."

She ran out to change her costume.

"I want to thank you a thousand times, Aimée," he said seriously, when she returned. "Use me as a reference. You've been a good child." He forced a jocose tone. He was feeling a bit blue at the prospect of losing her. "When does the wonderful house party begin?"

"To-morrow. We're going to motor out. Some time, we'll have!"

"You ought not to go, Aimée. Well, do be careful."

They shook hands, laughing a little. Then she tripped away.

VI

NEILSEN had a strange, empty, let-down feeling that afternoon. The picture was done. Every one said it was good. It *was* good, only—

But no doubt he was foolish to be dissatisfied. He cleaned his brushes, and decided to go out for the rest of the day.

He hunted up Hendricks, and dragged him away from the book manuscript he was perusing, preparatory to illustrating it. Hendricks had a small car. They drove out through Yonkers, and up the river.

The passive exercise was soothing to Neilsen. He listened with half an ear to Hendricks's talk. He was receptive to the late October landscape and the tonic air. The flat, let-down feeling departed.

They dined at an inn, and drove home in the early evening. When they were within a few blocks of the studio, they heard fire engines. Presently they found the crowd so large that they had to park the car and proceed on foot.

Then they saw that it was Neilsen's building that was burning. It was a five-story studio apartment house of cream-colored brick.

A choking, sodden rage filled Neilsen. The injustice of it! His best work! All his patient, inspired labor! Hendricks's grasp on his arm tightened.

The firemen had roped off the crowd. One was running along shouting:

"No cause for alar-r-rum! Ivery wan is out!"

The two artists pressed as close as they could.

"'Tis nothing but a lot av impty stoodio places that's burnin'," went on the cheerful fire-fighter.

Suddenly Adam Beith pounced on them. He had evidently recognized Neilsen's height across the crowd. He pressed the painter's other arm.

"Your etchings, Adam!" began Neilsen.

"They're nothing to the bonny picture, man!"

The Scotsman choked over the words.

Clearly the building was doomed. The walls might hold, but the interior was gone. Smoke began to curl out of the windows. Glass snapped. Neilsen's studio was on the third floor. The worst of the fire was still above that.

"*God! Look!*"

The crowd sent up a shout of horror, as a studio window, not yet broken, swung open, and a figure emerged. Aimée! Barefooted—in the blue shift! She stood on the sill, and she had the picture in her grasp.

"Aimée!" bellowed Neilsen. "You little fool!"

She stood still, on one foot, head flung up. *It was the pose!* Neilsen stared, fascinated, hardly breathing; for on her face was the expression he had missed getting in the picture—real challenge—not merely gay ignorance! He would never forget it!

Below, the firemen were spreading the life net. In the kinship of horror, the throng was silent. A moment more Aimée held the pose. Then, with a gay laugh which all could hear, she jumped. The blue drapery was on fire.

There was a great, collective groan. The firemen fought back the crowd, fought back the three artists at the edge of the rope barrier. The net strained.

Adam Beith it was who caught up the picture, unharmed. Neilsen stepped over the rope—over the protests—and picked up Aimée. With Hendricks clearing an avenue, he carried her out beyond the throng.

A dozen coats were whipped off to make a couch for her. Neilsen laid her down tenderly, and arranged the blue shift about her. She was still smiling—a ghost of that last gallant challenge.

By this time Hendricks had found a physician in the crowd; but Neilsen didn't need a physician to tell him that Aimée was dead. How she came to be in the burning studio he never knew, though he guessed that her love of "Challenge" had drawn her there for a farewell sight of it; but she had done her last service to art when she saved his picture.

A CORAL SHORE

Bowlders shaggy with seaweed like huge sponges,
  Torn from the jutting cliffs of somber gray;
Gigantic wasp nests where the wild shore plunges,
  Sharp as a tooth and flecked with tooth-white spray,
Into wild waters of shagreen and beryl
  Where shallow, but blue-black between the shoals
Through which a swimmer ventures at his peril
  Out to the reefs, where combers champ like foals.

Untamed the scene I've painted? No less savage
  The one I chose for bathing the other day,
Heedless how quick wild nature is to ravage
  The half denaturalized, her easiest prey.
If I can taunt us both this sunny morning,
  Jest at the memory of a night-dark fin,
It is because some lost sense gave me warning
  To search more deeply for that moonlike grin!

Richard Butler Glaenzer

Decent Things

THE STORY OF AN INTERESTING SOCIAL EXPERIMENT

By Edgar Franklin

Author of "Regular People," "A Noise in Newboro," etc.

XXI

THE torpid Mr. Dinsmore was just drifting into slumber when the ladies returned from their interview with Stephen Valmer. He drifted out again, at first sight of them, with a suddenness that was almost painful. Blinking, he jerked upright and tried to stare—for if they were not actually staggering, any other description of their gait would at least have been difficult.

"My—my soul!" he gasped. "You *did* find out!"

Ina's glassy eyes roved in his general direction.

"Yes, we — we found out!" she murmured wildly.

"I say!" Mr. Dinsmore cried, springing to his feet. "She's gone and married him?"

"She—hush! No, she hasn't done that. She—it's worse than that, Wells," said his wife.

Mr. Dinsmore sat down again.

"Oh, Edith!" he faltered. "Not—not father?"

"Don't be absurd! She — Mary—she—" Here Mrs. Dinsmore put forth a determined effort, and mastered herself, at least to the point where coherency was possible. "She's an experiment, Wells, in development! She's a — a factory girl he's educated. That's all!"

"But why did he—"

"It's not all, by any means," Ina interrupted wildly. "He's been trying to evolve a perfect woman out of a guttersnipe, and apparently he thinks he has succeeded. Now he's planning to go on and on and on with the work — dozens of Marys — hundreds of Marys!"

"All like this one?" Mr. Dinsmore inquired eagerly. "All coming here?"

"You're not funny, Wells!" Mrs. Fayles snapped. "You haven't heard the real point of the joke yet. Dad's planning to devote his whole fortune to the cultivation of Marys!"

Had there been a certain suggestion of frivolity about Wells Dinsmore, it vanished now in the very tiniest instant. His jaw dropped blankly.

"Oh, but I say!" he protested. "Penning would never permit that!"

"Penning! Penning's madder about it than father!" Mrs. Fayles rasped. "Penning waved his hands and enthused!"

"Well, then—but—well, I say! *What are we going to do about this?*" Edith's husband demanded.

"Get rid of the hussy!" Edith said darkly.

"Precisely! How?" said Mrs. Fayles.

"Well, a thing like this isn't possible! It simply isn't possible!" Edith stated, and threw out her own hands. "One *has* limits of endurance! I think we're both rather bewildered, Ina. I think we—we'd better wait until Henry gets home, and see what he has to suggest."

Mr. Dinsmore sat erect again. Looking at him just then, one would almost have fancied that his mental machinery was functioning.

"Needs a man's strong hand, this does," he asserted. "Good enough! No need to wait for Henry, my dears. You've got a man's strong hand now."

"Oh, yes!" Ina smiled wanly, as she glanced at him. "But—"

"Don't scorn it because it's white and patrician, Ina," Mr. Dinsmore went on. "First place, this is really a literal fact?

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He really is determined to spend his money growing Marys?"

"It's a fact!"

"Then the first thing to do is to get rid of this one, and then to mold dear old father's mind back to form again. Wouldn't do to go directly to the girl and tell her she's—inconvenient?"

"Why, if you ever tried that, father, in his present condition—"

"Just so. Have to be more subtle about it—a lot more subtle. Right! Let's consider Mary herself. Laying aside all prejudice, I suppose we'll have to admit that, whatever else she may or may not be, Mary's a nice girl—self-respecting, I mean, and delicate sensibilities, and all that?"

Ina glanced at her brother-in-law with raised eyebrows.

"If one must admit such a thing," she said, "yes, I almost believe she is. She seems to be. One can't tell."

"All right! Insult her."

"Deliberately?"

"And so as to leave no doubt in her mind, Ina, that she's not welcome."

"Oh, and have her go to father, whining, and—" Edith began wearily.

"Oh, but you don't get what I'm driving at, honey. You don't get it at all!" her husband said earnestly. "I'm not suggesting that one of us—should—er—slap her face, or curse her like a truck-driver. That's not at all what I mean. But—accidents *will* happen!"

"For example?"

"Well, for example, if Mary should, by some unfortunate chance, overhear some of us discussing her in such a way that—I say, are you sure that door's locked?"

In the mind of Mary herself there was only the sorriest confusion. She had left the Valmer home very gladly. She had returned almost as gladly. She had been unhappy here; she had been unhappy in her own home; once more she was unhappy here. It was more than confusing—it was downright maddening.

By any ordinary course of reasoning, she should not be here. She was permitting an eccentric old gentleman to support her and giving nothing in return—a fact which gnawed more insistently every hour. Somehow, that phase hadn't mattered so much at Mrs. Fairson's. Life had been a delightful adventure up there, but here the spell was broken.

Unless Mary's judgment was altogether bad, Stephen Valmer's daughters were not particularly fond of her. There was no obvious reason why they should be—and, on the other hand, no reason why they shouldn't. Without undue egotism, she might consider herself at least as desirable a person as either of them. She didn't smoke, she didn't drink, she had no personal friends with the astonishing moral code of Mrs. Milner or the vocabulary and views of Miss Forbes. But Edith Dinsmore and Ina Fayles happened to be Stephen's daughters, and this happened to be their home—both of which trifling facts she might do well to take into account.

She—yes, she wanted to flee again, even now, after dinner; but Stephen Valmer wished her to remain in his house, and the old gentleman's investment in her was such that his wishes must be respected. And even so—*oh!*

If only there was some one at hand with whom she might talk over the odd situation! Oh, no, not a person like Stephen, or like her father; each had his own peculiar views. And not a woman—no, some one like Hammond, big and strong and sane and decent.

Jim Hammond was all of that, and—oh, yes, she *had* looked forward to seeing him again in the factory. He was part of the atmosphere, of course. What wretched impulse had prompted him to leave just as she was returning? He—well, he had done it, at all events.

Mary shrugged, and sighed, and returned to her book, conscious of the queerest little crawling sensation in the knowledge that Stephen was covertly watching her over his newspaper. They had had a private ten-minute chat, just before dinner. It was his wish that she should take her place in the family, and should come to him, whenever she felt prompted, for a frank, confidential little talk.

She would be better and happier in the morning, no doubt—better able to think, that is, and to scheme some sort of graceful future exit. There was no denying that that was what she most desired just now. Somewhere there was a world of the kind Mary craved—not a Stephen Valmer world, full of unusual ideas, or a Jenny Ross world, cheap and somewhat brazen, but—oh, a Hammond sort of world, where people were just right and ordinary and sound, perhaps even a little bit conventional, but at all events devoted to living life in the fullest and finest sense.

Morning found Mary no more serene.

Edith Dinsmore was avoiding her, unostentatiously but deliberately. When Stephen chanced to be elsewhere, the hostility in the lady's eye was so thinly veiled as to bring more than one annoyed flush to Mary's cheek. Ina's pretense of cordiality was so screamingly perfunctory as to be even more disturbing.

Wells Dinsmore seemed to be keeping out of her way, too, and Mary smiled angrily at the rather sheepish, guilty light in his eye. It was possible, with the country club evening on his mind, that Mr. Dinsmore had a conscience. Fayles had chatted with her naturally enough at breakfast, but—really, she was not markedly fond of Mr. Fayles.

The day dragged horribly. The next day dragged quite as horribly. In the afternoon Mary happened upon Barton on the side veranda. Strange to relate—for she had not meant to address him — Mary found herself saying:

" Oh, Barton, by the way!"

" Yes, miss?"

" There was a mechanic working here, three or four days ago, quite early in the morning, I believe," Mary went on glibly. " He — er — knew some people I used to know a good while ago, and they want to get in touch with him. I—just happened to speak to him, you know. His name was —oh, yes—Hammond."

" Yes, miss?" the butler repeated attentively, as Mary paused.

" Well, can you tell me where he's working now?"

Mr. Barton gave grave, genuine thought to the proposition.

" Do you know what sort of job he was doing here, miss?"

" Well, no, I don't. He was a—a mechanic, I think."

" Just so, Miss Allers." Barton smiled benevolently. " But there's a good many mechanics about the place, first and last, especially at this season. As for this one, I really couldn't say. The house man looks after those chaps, miss, and I have no dealings with them."

" Oh, yes—Simms, of course," Mary said prettily. " Well, will you ask Simms—some time, any time—if he knows where a postal will reach Hammond?"

" I'd certainly be glad to do that, miss, but I can't," the butler said, with a little frown. " I had occasion to dismiss Simms yesterday, and where he's gone I couldn't say. If it's important—"

" Oh, no!" Mary murmured. " No—it's not important."

Well, then, Jimmy Hammond was—well, he was gone. Having devoted some time to an unseeing study of the afternoon sunshine, which was steadily deteriorating in cheering quality these latter days, Mary roamed into the grounds behind the house.

Ina and the Forbes woman—odd that she should have taken to calling her that mentally—had just motored in, and were strolling off to the east side of the place. Mary headed due west. Great friends, those two, were they not? An intimacy of long standing, and not, to Mary's mind, one she would have cared to share.

Mary laughed suddenly and mirthlessly. Positively, she was growing snobbish! If Ina elected to walk arm in arm with a young woman who professed unbelief in morality and marriage, who swore like a trooper and smoked cigarettes like a newsboy, that, surely, was Ina's right. Mary had no idea of commenting upon it, even to herself. Indeed, so far as she was concerned, Ina and her friend and all the rest of her friends might go hang together! All Mary wanted was escape.

At the extreme corner of the grounds was a giant rock. Having passed it, one might hunch down miserably upon the ground and direct the gloomiest of stares at a considerable stretch of pretty country, without distressing any one in the world. This Mary did, and, chin in hands, pondered hard.

There were—there must be!—a thousand ways of leaving nicely and comfortably. And once she had found the best one?

No, Mary had no intention of returning to the Allers flat. She wanted to get away —away! She wanted to go—oh, to some other city, perhaps, and find herself an office job of some kind. If she starved in the process of finding it, what of that? Nothing seemed to matter very much today—nothing except that matter of getting away. Mary's chin went lower.

" The most unspeakably impossible thing, my dear! She was simply thrust in, and we weren't consulted. We have no choice about enduring her!" said Ina's voice, at a little distance.

Mary sat up suddenly. They seemed to be approaching her rock.

"It's beyond me. I can't understand it, Ina," contributed the harsher, more positive voice of Miss Forbes. "Your father's always seemed so sane, too. Where did he find the creature in the first place?"

"Heaven only knows. The gutter, I suppose — or a factory, I think it was," Mrs. Fayles went on more loudly.

Mary turned red.

"Sane? Why, she has reduced him to a condition of hypnosis, I tell you. She's bleeding him white. He's spent money on her, and money, and money. I've tried to wring the truth out of Penning, you know, and he did admit that much. Every stitch on her back father paid for and — oh!" cried Mrs. Fayles, as Mary bounded up.

There was a single highly interesting second wherein Mary looked directly at Stephen's younger daughter, and that lady simulated complete confusion.

"I heard!" Mary said very quietly.

"Oh, but—but, my dear!" Ina protested. "You—really you mustn't—"

Mary, walking steadily, swiftly, toward the house, failed to turn back. A gentle and satisfied sigh escaped Mrs. Fayles as she considered the graceful receding figure.

"After all," said she, "that was very simple and very effective!"

Miss Forbes snorted, and also gazed after Mary.

"Personally," she said, "I think it was pretty damned raw!"

In his den, Mr. Valmer was reading placidly—a most absorbing monograph, in fact, on the intensive culture of initiative as a distinct quality, in characters stunted or otherwise malformed — when Mary knocked. He laid aside the little volume and considered her benignly.

"Ah! You've come for one of our talks?" he asked. "Take a seat, my dear."

"I'll stand," Mary said briefly. "Mr. Valmer, will you please tell me how much I have cost you?"

"Eh?"

"From the very beginning to this minute—everything!" Mary said.

Stephen failed to note the tremor of fury in her voice. Indeed, he laughed softly.

"Do you know, I've often wondered when that would occur to you, and in just what form," his gentle voice said very comfortably. "Mary, my dear, let this be the one subject upon which you need never waste a single thought. What little I have spent, I spent selfishly and to satisfy my own curiosity. You are what you are today—and that repays me very fully. The matter is closed forever," Mr. Valmer concluded, even more comfortably.

"It isn't closed. I wish to know."

"But—"

"I insist upon knowing!" Mary cried passionately.

Mr. Valmer sat up and stared.

"But, my dear, what is wrong?"

"*Wrong!*" gasped his product, and the tremor invaded her whole body. "It—no, nothing's wrong—or nothing that I care to discuss. Only I must know—do you hear? I *must* know what you've spent on me!"

This time her voice rose with almost hysterical shrillness. Stephen frowned.

"Well, my child, I must know just what occasioned this outburst!"

Her cheeks red, her eyes sparkling, Mary's tight-lipped little smile had a grim and peculiar expression. For one moment she had been on the verge of voicing her true sentiments with the utmost candor. That moment—mercifully, perhaps, for the peace of the household—had passed.

"Well, you taught me how to think, and I've been thinking," she said. "You taught me perspective, and I've been using it. I've—come to a very definite conclusion. Mr. Valmer, how much have you spent on me, please?"

"Well, I'm blest if I can tell you to a penny, but perhaps it would be about twenty-five thousand dollars, Mary," Stephen said uncertainly.

"Very well, then! Mr. Valmer, if I find an office position, or a factory position, or any other sort of position that pays—if I get work that I can do, and keep at it, day and night, if possible, will you accept from me weekly, for the rest of my life, every cent that isn't literally required to keep my body and soul together?"

"Will I do what?" choked her benefactor, in surprise.

"Until I've paid it off? If I — I die meanwhile, I can't pay any more. If you die, I'll go on paying your estate. Every cent of that money's going to be paid!"

Mr. Valmer had passed the first stage of shock. Keenest interest was in his eye just now.

"Mary," he said, "poise, according to Mrs. Fairson, was one of your most promising points."

"I'm using all I possess just now." Mary laughed bitterly. "Will you do that?"

"No! Decidedly, I shall do nothing of the kind. And now, I think, we may consider this at an end. Sit down, my dear, and tell me—"

"I wonder if there's any way that I can force you to do it!" said Mary.

"There—what? No, there is not," replied Stephen, smiling quietly, albeit the interest in his eye grew. "And it's quite preposterous to—"

"Oh, no, it's not preposterous! There's nothing preposterous about it!" his laboratory specimen said quickly. "I'll pay you, if—if—"

And there, her eyes widening, Mary stopped, struck by a new thought. Her sudden smile was almost triumphant.

"Mrs. Dwight," said the unusual young woman, "hasn't found a maid yet to take Nora's place, the maid who was taken ill—or perhaps you didn't know?"

"Eh? I know that one of the maids—"

"Well, *I* mean to take Nora's place!"

"As—as a maid in this house?"

"Without pay! Nora's wages were fifty dollars a month, I think. That's six hundred dollars a year," said Mary, and momentarily her voice weakened. "It will take years and years, but—"

"Mary," smiled Stephen, "I can't quite account for all this at the moment, but wouldn't it be just a little bit better to sit down quietly and—"

"No, it wouldn't, Mr. Valmer! I mean to do just that. If I can't do that, I'll do something else. I'll scrub. I'll wash your clothes. I'll wash your servants' clothes, but I'll pay back that money! That weekly check to father—that must be stopped, too!" concluded Mary, as she started for the door.

"Mary!"

"If you please, I'm going to see Mrs. Dwight," the girl concluded, very crisply.

Stephen Valmer raised no hand to stay her. When the door had clicked after her, he frowned meditatively at his finger tips, which were drumming together. At last he even smiled.

Out of the little nook that was his dressing room, Mr. Wells Dinsmore sauntered, the perfect figure of a man arrayed for dinner. He sauntered out, and then paused and grinned complacently, for both his wife and her sister were in the exquisite little living room of the suite.

Mrs. Fayles sat staring at Mrs. Dinsmore. Mrs. Dinsmore sat staring at Mrs. Fayles. So women sit and stare after an earthquake, or upon finding themselves cast upon a desert island. Almost instantly a bright child might have suspected that something was radically wrong; but the normal speed of Mr. Dinsmore's mentality was rather below that of a child. His complacent smile still shone down upon the two ladies as he said:

"Well? Worked nicely, eh?"

Neither lady answered immediately.

"Bound to work, of course!" Mr. Dinsmore pursued. "Bit rough on the girl, but no way of avoiding that. Anything would be better than having her about, if she affects father to the extent of wanting to evolve a million of her out of the family funds! I say, give the devil his due, will you? Bit wonderful of me to have thought out—"

"Wonderful!" Mrs. Fayles hissed, quite insanely, at him. "Yes—and *you're* wonderful, Wells!"

"Hey?" returned her brother-in-law. "Didn't it work? But of course it did. I saw her coming to the house with fire in her eye, and—"

"You didn't see her leave the house, did you?" Edith asked, with a small and terrible smile.

"Er—no."

"Well, she's here still! She's here permanently, so far as we can learn! She's out there now, in white cap and apron, dusting the banisters!"

"Doing what?"

"Yes!" rattled in Ina's distressed throat. "She's turned into a maid now!"

XXII

For some peculiar reason, the energetic operation of his powerful press, and his cherished atmosphere of industrial democracy, were failing to soothe the ruffled John. He had expected, quite fully and honestly, to experience vast relief upon going to work this morning, even if no particular consolation had come to him overnight in his clean and humble little room; but the relief had failed to arrive.

Three years ago, of course—oh, well, the very air of the place had been different then. The splendid, hard-fisted men were about the same, he presumed, even if time had caused some of their novelty to disappear; but the fine, sturdy faces of the women, notably in the packing room, were missing. The workers there were sturdy enough, perhaps, but only dark and rather furtive faces were ranged along the tables now, and the low-toned conversation was chiefly in European tongues. Jenny Ross remained, to be sure, and one or two more of the old girls, to whom John had never spoken, whose names he did not even know; but—

After eleven o'clock, John did a most unusual thing. Abruptly he ceased working, and, with arms folded, spent a long time staring at his press.

"Something wrong, Hammond?" Eggers asked unexpectedly.

"Eh? Yes!"

Mr. Eggers bent closer to the machinery, and scowled.

"Well, what d'ye know?" he muttered angrily. "We've had three men overhaulin' this stuff, these last five Sundays—double time. I thought they O. K.'d everything in here."

"Oh, there's nothing wrong with the press," John said impatiently.

He reached for a new supply of the little brass plates on which he was working that morning. His automatic fingers fed in plates, pulled over the lever, and took out little brass lids.

Mr. Eggers, having considered this temperamental employee for some two minutes, scratched his head with his toothpick, and muttered, and even shook his head. There was something about John of which he didn't approve.

There was something about John, also, of which John himself didn't approve. He might just as well admit that this was absolutely nothing for him to be doing. Three years ago he had been many years younger, and filled with fiery and ridiculous ideals. The palpable failings of the élite had sickened him—they did that now, so far as that went—and there had been great appeal in the fine American atmosphere of this establishment.

When girls like Mary Allers had been in that packing room, for example! Now, as it appeared, Mary had never even belonged there; and yet John had drifted straight back here from his uncle's home, much as if—bosh!

The whistle blew. John popped out of another fit of preoccupation, which Eggers had observed with growing concern, slipped into his coat, took down his hat, and strode off for lunch—not through the far door, as usual, but through the packing room. Most of the girls had gone. Miss Jenny Ross, of more leisurely tendency, was still adjusting her too jaunty turban before the cracked mirror.

John stopped short beside her.

"Hello, Jenny!"

"Well! Is it Jimmy?" cried that young lady. "I unnerstood you'd gone."

"I'm back now. Jenny, do you remember the girl who used to work next to you—Mary Allers?"

"Do I remember her? She was here yesterday—workin'."

"*Here?*" gasped John. His eyes bulged so astonishingly that Miss Ross's fairly nimble brain rose, as it were, on tiptoe, all ready to race. "Is—is she going to work here again?"

"Not so you'd notice it, Jimmy. Eggers canned her."

"Why?"

Miss Ross fluffed the edges of her hair and smiled almost superciliously.

"She was kind of on the fritz, Jim," said she. "She wasn't so good at wrappin' boxes no more."

"She—" John began fiercely, and then, in the fraction of a second, he produced a wheedling smile. "Say, Jenny, you know where Miss Allers lives now?"

"*Huh?*"

"Will you give me the address, please?"

Miss Ross drew a long, deep breath. Her eyes twinkled—but just behind them there was no twinkle at all, but only great activity.

"Say, listen, Jim," she said kindly. "Couple o' times before you ast me that question, an' I told you there was nothin' doin'."

"Of course! I understand all that now," returned John. "She's a student of sociology, or a writer, or something like that, and—"

"For the love o' Mike! Who handed you *that* line?" Jenny breathed.

"And I understand her motives, but I assure you it's quite all right for you to tell me now."

"Oh! Quite all right, eh, old chap?" Miss Ross murmured amazedly.

"Where does she live?"

"Really, you know, I—I couldn't say," drawled Jenny.

"Have it your own way!" John said, as he turned on his heel.

Mr. Eggers, who saw the shop empty before attacking his own little lunch box, looked up with a start as the door opened and John strode in. You can tell so much by the way a man walks! This Hammond bird was walking as if he owned the whole works!

"Busy, Mr. Eggers? I won't keep you a moment."

"So?"

"There was a young girl here when I first came—a Miss Allers. I understand that she was here yesterday. Will you be good enough to give me her address?"

"What's that?" rasped Eggers, apparently in sudden wrath.

"Nothing extraordinary about that, is there? I merely wish—"

"Say, what you merely wish cuts no figure, young feller!" the foreman said sternly. "There's nothing doing on that stuff—not in this shop!"

"You mean that — that you refuse to give it to me?"

"I'll say I do!"

"It's a matter of record here, of course?"

"It certainly is, and everybody else's address that ever worked here since the first wheel turned over, Hammond — but they get *you* nothin'! What's the idea of this, anyhow?" Mr. Eggers asked angrily. "You know the rules here!"

"I didn't know there was any rule—"

"Well, you know it now, because I'm telling you, Hammond. No male employee o' this house gets any information about the private life of a female employee—and that's absolutely flat! What a girl does once she's outside these gates is her own business. We got no control over that; but you'll learn nothin' in here about her! You see, we had quite some trouble along them lines at one time, Hammond," Eggers pursued, less harshly. "Two or three young guys got in that wasn't here just to make brass parts—you understand? We had some swell lookers working for us about that time, and—well, after that excitement was over, an' we'd took our share of the blame, as you might say, old Mors laid down the law about givin' out social information and neglecting precautions; and so far as I know, the law ain't been broke yet."

"Oh, but that's all nonsense in this case! You see—"

"You needn't explain. So far as I ever knew, May's an honest girl, absolutely on the level—so let it go at that. Say, what's the matter with you this last few days, Hammond? You chuck your job, you grab your job again, you go to sleep on your job, and now you're in here trying to put something over! What's the idea?"

He looked John up and down. John controlled himself, and left.

Miss Ross, oddly, was waiting in the packing room. In this brief interval, a number of impressions had whisked across the field of Jenny's inner vision.

Jimmy Hammond, for one thing, was certainly a swell young fellow. She had all but forgotten him, yet after being at close quarters for two minutes she seemed to have warmed to him again. There was something about him — *something!* She had sensed it very vaguely before this, but to-day it simply stuck out all over him—something! He was not like his fellows. He talked differently, he acted differently. He acted grand and looked grand—so Jenny put it—when he was asking about May!

And why, pray, was he asking about May? Did he really have a crush on May? Not to say a word against May, but she was away up stage now, and, not to kid one's self, she wasn't fit to associate with any longer. All the same, Jimmy must have fooled himself into thinking he had a crush on May—and *that* sort of thing appealed to Jenny Ross as a direct challenge which could not possibly be ignored.

Several times Miss Ross smiled, very thoughtfully. You know, the more you thought about this Jimmy boy, the more interesting he got!

Nor, by the way, was this mere idle curiosity about the supposed Mr. Hammond. One doesn't normally go on packing wretched little brass boxes forever and ever. Out of the old crowd of three years ago, nearly half had married, some well, some otherwise. Jenny, in her own class, had been content to be a butterfly for a good while now; and while she might be, and really flattered herself that she was, growing even more attractive, it was very, very certain that she was getting no younger.

"Say, Jimmy!"

Miss Ross's voice tinkled musically, as he would have passed.

"What?" barked John Valmer, alias Jim Hammond.

"Oh, *Jimmy!* That ain't no way to yap at a girl!"

"I didn't mean to yap at you. I—I'm going to lunch."

"Down to Schlittmann's?"

"Naturally."

"Alone?" Miss Ross queried ever so softly.

She could be effective. Despite himself, John grinned.

"Why all the siren effect, Jenny?" he queried.

"The which?"

"The vamp stuff."

"That ain't such a nice thing to say!" Miss Ross murmured, and dropped her eyes. Then she opened them wide again, and smiled dazzlingly. "Jimmy, why are you so rabid to know where May lives?"

"Miss Allers?" John said stiffly. "I—I want to communicate with her. That's really all. Will you tell me?"

"Could be I don't know!"

"I think you do," John said flatly.

"But if I don't," breathed Jenny, "it might be I could find out."

"Well, will you do that?" John asked eagerly.

Miss Ross smiled again, directly at him, and in a manner which suggested in the most astonishing way that her very soul was about to surge out in search of John's soul.

"Of course, I ain't a man," she reflected irrelevantly. "I'm a girl. A man's different, huh? Sometimes you want to find out something from a girl, so she's got to get teased an' jollied a little. You can't tell about a girl—not always. I think you got to treat 'em nice!"

Young Mr. Valmer considered her.

"In other words, I'm being invited to invite you to lunch, Jenny?"

"Oh, now, listen!" Miss Ross protested, and bridled quite indignantly.

Young Mr. Valmer considered further. One adapts one's self occasionally! He grinned again, and suddenly thrust his arm through that of Miss Ross.

"You're on!" he said cheerily.

"I dunno what the gang's goin' to think when they see us comin' in!" Jenny sighed pleasantly, and tightened her own arm over John's.

So they lunched together at Schlittmann's, becoming the butt of divers rude jokes; but when they returned to work, John knew no more of Mary's whereabouts than when they had started. He did know, though, that they were attending the pictures together that evening, and that Jenny was luring him along in quite artistic fashion. For the present he would have to do his own share, or to sever relations with her.

It was irritating, without being at all unendurable. John was quite human, and Miss Ross, whatever her crudities, was a rather amusing and attractive personality. She seemed to live on romance. In this case, dosed sufficiently with romance, she would presently reveal Mary's address. That seemed to be the tacit agreement; and whether he did or did not relish the silly little affair, Jenny was apparently the only source of the desired information.

He met her, by appointment, that evening, on a certain street corner—which happened to be Jenny's own corner, but which John was given to understand lay several blocks from her home. They sat in the rear row, and Jenny looked up at him and sighed frequently and tremendously. This failing, she snuggled closer and observed:

"The backs o' these seats are hard, Jimmy!"

The required arm went about her, somewhat reluctantly. Miss Ross laid her nicely waved head upon John's shoulder, and continued her sighing in a contented minor key. This should have got him. She believed that it was getting him—a little, anyhow.

On his own side, John fondly fancied that he must be working nearer to the goal; yet when they left the theater he was still entirely ignorant of Mary's address.

He wished, of course, to accompany Miss Ross to her home. They halted at the same corner, however, and Jenny said:

"Nix, Jimmy! This is where we got to break. My old man — you got no idea. He's that strict with me that a young feller—any young feller—well, if he seen me come home with a young feller, he'd think I was goin' to marry him!"

John started.

"Well, perhaps you're—er—right, then, Jenny!" he said.

"So you mustn't go no farther with me, Jimmy," Jenny concluded tenderly. "Not—yet."

"And you're not going to tell me—" John began, in a light and jocular way.

"G'night, Jim!" said Miss Ross, in a voice that seemed quite hoarse with feeling, and she sped away through the late evening.

Alone in her room, the light out, she thought rapidly and intelligently. Most decidedly there was something about Jimmy Hammond — something different from all the rest of them. She had always been aware of that difference, but never until this evening of its vastness. The way he talked, when one came to know him better, the politeness of his manners—nobody had ever treated Jenny as he did. Why, when he was saying good night, he took off his hat and stood with it off!

A fellow like that was a nut to be working for Mors, even if he did make good money. He was a nut, too, to be thinking of a little cat like Mary; and he was some fellow, too, on his own account!

They lunched together again next day, and this time the jokes grew so pointed as to set John's teeth to gritting. That particular crowd knew swift romances when such blossomed under their very noses, and commented accordingly.

John sought to take it all good-naturedly, for the means justified the end; but Jenny startled him by blushing repeatedly. It was, incidentally, one of Jenny's gifts, the trick of blushing at will.

Again that evening they attended the pictures. John, hating himself vaguely, endeavored to grow so much better acquainted with Jenny that he would be able to learn what he wished, and then to have done with all this! As to the ripening of acquaintance, he succeeded beyond his wildest ambitions, but at the familiar corner he still lacked Mary's address.

" I got to go now. I hate to go, Jim!" Miss Ross stated.

" Why don't we—take a little walk somewhere, and talk?"

" Yeh, sure. Only what time is it now?"

John reached for his watch, held it to the light of the corner lamp, and looked at it. Miss Ross thrust out a sudden, involuntary hand, caught at it, and turned its back upward.

" My—my goodness!" she gasped, since John seemed to avoid strong language. " That's some watch! *Diamonds!* I never seen that before!"

" I—I never carry it to work," John said uncomfortably.

" What's the diamonds, Jim? Oh, your monogram, huh? No, it ain't, either. It—it says ' J. V.' here."

" Why, that's just a—just an old watch that's been in the family for a good many years," John said, far too hastily, and thrust it back into his pocket. " Shall we go down to—"

" I — I dassn't, Jimmy! I — my old man, you know!" Miss Ross choked, apparently with genuine feeling this time. " Maybe—some evening pretty soon, dear, you'll—oh, g' night!"

She fled, for she had need for solitary meditation. Young Mr. Valmer frowned after her. That " dear " was a bit too fervent. He loathed this kind of thing, anyhow. He had been an ass ever to undertake finding out Mary's address by any such dubious method. It was a large and unworthy error.

Still, he *had* to find Mary! Oh, yes, he admitted that much very frankly now—he *had* to find her! Within John Valmer burned a strange fever; but with it no pebble at the bottom of the South Pacific had less to do than had Jenny Ross.

That young woman slept but little. Be it said that no genuine and consuming passion for John was racking her; but—that " J. V."! And the diamonds in which the two small letters were worked out weren't chips, but regular cut diamonds. And he lied when he said that it was an old family watch, because it was not a quarter of an inch thick. So it was his watch, and J. V. were his initials! His name wasn't Hammond. It was—what?

XXIII

At noon John endeavored to leave by the side door, intending to lunch at almost any other establishment in New York save that of Gustaf Schlittmann, one corner below. He stepped directly into a group of five girls from the packing room, who swarmed about him and rallied him gayly, until Jenny, her head a trifle higher than usual, appeared hurriedly and led him away.

She was really rather charming to-day, he discovered with hazy astonishment. She was demure, and apparently as much annoyed as himself at the gibes of the herd. Several times she glanced pathetically at John. He was rather startled to find himself piloting her out of the unlovely place at the earliest opportunity, and with a certain indignant, protective feeling.

Pictures to-night seemed to be a matter of course. John assented, but he inwardly vowed that, with Mary located or without, this was to be the last excursion of its kind.

When he met Jenny, he discovered that they were going to another house this evening—a cheaper one. Once within its stuffy confines, he discovered further that it was apparently the favorite haunt of Mors employees. He and Jenny were hailed from a dozen different directions as they found seats before the starting of the performance.

His next discovery was that Jenny seemed to have gone quite crazy. She snuggled up to him and insisted on the usual arm. With this about her, she pressed his hand tight against her, and patted it with her own.

A cold, creeping sense of impending evil came upon young Valmer. It increased with her great, fluttering sighs. When the main picture came to an end, and blurred and jerky announcements of coming attractions were being flashed upon the screen, there in the darkness Miss Ross extended her graceful throat upward and suddenly kissed John—and at that instant the lights were turned on!

Merriment exploded hoarsely, all about them. Just behind, a nameless young woman of the packing room leaned forward and said jovially:

"Hey! You want to get chucked out? Do your pettin' in the dark!"

Jenny turned and laughed.

"Aw, this is kiddin' on the level!" she said, very gently and sweetly. "We're gettin' married in June!"

John's teeth shut with a dumfounded click, and he stared straight ahead. Miss Ross, if she noted these things, seemed not to mind. Indeed, she continued to pat his hand. She respected his silence until they were in the outer air—and then there was no longer any silence to respect, for John turned on her with a savage—

"What on earth possessed you to say that?"

"To say what, honey?" Jenny inquired adoringly.

"About—about getting married!"

"Well?" Jenny queried wonderingly. "Ain't we?"

"No!"

"Why, but—Jimmy! I—I—"

"You know perfectly well that nothing of the sort has ever been suggested!" John pursued, ever so energetically. "Jenny, you've no right—"

"I have no right! I have no right! My Gawd! What d'ye mean, I have no right?" the young lady cried suddenly, wildly. "Ain't you been makin' love to me, Jimmy? Ain't we been goin' around together steady, an'—"

"For—for three days!"

"And don't everybody know it, there at the shop? Ain't they been kiddin' us regular? I have no *right?* Why, ain't it just the same as settled that—"

"No!" John essayed desperately. "I—"

"Because I want you to unnerstan' I'm a perfectly straight, honest girl! I—I thought you knew that, Jimmy! An' when a man acts toward a person the way you've been actin' toward me, it don't mean but one thing!"

"Jenny, if I've ever said or done anything to suggest—well, I—I've had my arm around you, of course, and all that rot, but you seemed to demand that, and—"

Like a puff of smoke, Miss Ross's fury had vanished. She gripped his arm and looked moistly up at him, a grievously wounded young gazelle.

"Aw, Jimmy, you don't want to ditch me? I'm just the same as disgraced if you ditch me now!" she said thickly.

"You're nothing of the kind!" gasped John, as street, lights, buildings, all whizzed about him in a swift, mad circle.

"Jimmy, what got you sore? Because I broke the news to Sadie so sudden?"

"Yes!"

"Your kind o' people don't do it that way, huh?"

"I should say not!" cried John's unguarded tongue.

"They—they announce it regular, an' give a party, an' all that stuff?"

"Well, Jenny, there are proper ways of doing these things, of course. In the first place, they have to happen before they can be announced—and this hasn't happened," young Mr. Valmer said dizzily. "You're misunderstanding everything. I don't know whether it's deliberate or not, but—"

"Jimmy, wait a second!" Miss Ross pleaded, in a very small voice. "I don't want you to say no more just now. You're mad, and it hurts somethin' terrible. I couldn't have a battle with *you*. It would just kill me! I want to go on home alone, please, Jim—no, I don't want you to foller me. I want to be alone! I just want to be alone!" Jenny concluded brokenly, as she sped away from him.

Ostensibly her heart had been shattered to little, agonizing fragments; but there was nothing to hint at this dreadful condition in the keen eyes which she directed after young Mr. Valmer on turning the first corner.

That distressed gentleman was hurrying away in the other direction, his shoulders hunched and his hands rammed far down in his trouser pockets. Miss Ross smiled faintly, but with animation. She had him guessing — there could be no reasonable doubt as to that; and, very frequently, guessing contests are rather profitable to the management.

Jim Hammond was no mere skilled workman. He was, or he had been, something altogether different. He was that easy-going boob type, not so hard to vamp, even to the extreme of matrimony. Even if recent excitement had disturbed Jenny's reasoning power, and he really was no more than a Mors employee, he wasn't such a bad bet.

"You got to marry somebody some time," she sagely told herself.

In coldest truth, she had John Valmer guessing, and that with a violence that fairly froze his brain. Why—why, the girl was insane! Or perhaps they did do things in this elemental way in her circle. John had never given much attention to the matrimonial customs of the masses.

Whether she was insane or not, he was done with her. Picking up the vastly desired trail of Mary Allers was one thing. He would have gone—indeed, he would go—to almost any limit to find the elusive Mary; but trying to pick it up in this way was worse than disastrous.

He had been an idiot of the most hopeless type, ever to go about it in this fashion. He had stumbled into the mess chiefly because, in his anxiety over the great quest, he had not stopped to think; but between now and to-morrow morning, he would have thought!

There was a door at the end of the Mors factory with the sign:

EMPLOYEES MUST NOT USE THIS ENTRANCE

A little past nine o'clock the next morning, John Valmer passed through this door and into the outer office of the establishment. His chin was set, his eyes were grim and slightly sunken. He had put in a bad night; but he was thoroughly determined now. Some things merely pass the ridiculous, and this of being unable to locate Mary Allers was one of them.

"Is Mr. Mors in his office?" he demanded of the boy at the desk.

"Hey! What's the idea?" observed that young person, looking him up and down. "See the sign on that door when you—"

"Is Mr. Mors in his office?" John inquired vibrantly.

"Sure he is! If you want to see him personal, you got to make an appointment through Mr. Eggers. The next time you come through that door—"

It was, perchance, to have been a threat; it was never finished. Young Mr. Valmer, at just this point, finding the boy in his way, seized him by the back of the neck and sent him spinning into the corner. Even as he caromed off the water cooler and squawkingly collided with the wall, John was passing down the corridor to the door of Mr. Mors himself.

He opened it. He strode in. Mors, an elderly, peppery mite of a man, looked up darkly and wonderingly.

"My name's—ah—Hammond. I work here," said the visitor.

"Yes, I recall your face. I—"

"A young woman named Mary Allers worked here three years ago, when I first came. I understand that she was here again several days ago. I should be greatly obliged to you, sir, if you would give me her address. There's something of importance that I wish—"

"*Bah!*" snapped the head of the firm. "Get out of here!"

"I'll do nothing of the kind," declared John. "I—"

"I assure you that you will, sir!" cried Mors, rising. "We have a rule in this establishment designed to make just that sort of thing impossible. Some other scoundrels, several years ago—"

"I've heard about them. As it happens, I'm not a scoundrel. Will you be so good as to suspend your rule for once and give me the—"

"*No!*" the head of the firm hurled at him. "And — by Jiminy, Hammond, if you don't lick it out of here, I'll have you thrown out of the works! Things are coming to a pretty pass if any—"

Here, like the boy, he stopped, although for a different reason. There was something about John just then which gave one pause before piling on too much abuse. The young man's fists were clenching, and his cheeks had turned an extremely fierce red. More, there was a glitter in his eye such as no employee of the past had ever chosen to fix upon Mr. Mors. Within young Mr. Valmer's cranium, during these last seconds, something had given way with a snap.

"Say, is this damned factory for sale, with all its records?" he roared.

Mr. Mors backed away from him two paces—unhappily, too, away from the bank of electric buttons, which might have summoned help. The peppery effort was somehow missing.

"Young man, are you speaking seriously?" he asked.

"You bet your life I am! Is it for sale?"

"The — ah — controlling interest — the Beechley interest, of course—is for sale, I believe," the head stammered soothingly.

"All right! What's it worth?"

"Hammond, I—I think, if you'll—sit down over there and—"

"*What's it worth?*" young Mr. Valmer thundered.

"It has been valued at four hundred thousand dollars. It—"

"Shut up and listen to me!" commanded the visitor. "Get your books ready. Get your contracts made out. I'll be here to-morrow morning—or late this afternoon, if possible — with my attorney, and with cash and securities covering that amount. Figure on it being this afternoon, please—about four o'clock!"

Whereupon, his eyes still blazing, young Mr. Valmer turned and strode straight out of the office.

Mr. Mors, tottering back to his chair, dried his wet brow with one shaking hand and pushed the button for Mr. Eggers with the other.

"Eggers!" said he, with weak rage. "Man—Hammond—been in here trying to—buy the works! He's insane, and he threatened me—"

"Hammond?" the foreman cried. "Say, he's been actin' queer all this last week, boss! He's been—"

"Well, I'm not interested in what he's been. I know what he is—he's a maniac!" Mr. Mors pursued, with gathering force. "If he ever shows his face around this plant again, hold him and call the police, and I'll see that he's attended to properly. And if any one like him ever gets into this office again, Eggers, you go! D'ye hear, Eggers? By Jiminy, *you go!*"

XXIV

If hitherto Mary had been a puzzle and a source of extreme irritation, she had now, without warning, turned into a maddening enigma. She was neither more nor less than the absolutely perfect maid!

No compiler of points could possibly have given her less than an even one hundred. She moved without a sound. Summoned, she seemed able to appear almost before the buzzer had ceased its buzzing. When she answered the telephone, wonder at such perfect voice modulation invariably came to the hearer. On the lower floor, in the few days following Nora's departure, there had been tiny dust spots, trifles out of place; there were none now.

In the matter of appearance, few maids in history had ever approached Mary Allers's standard. Her trim black uniform was part of her. No single hair strayed untidily apart from its fellows. Considering her little white cap, one knew at last just how a little white cap should look.

She spoke quietly, with the utmost respect, yet with no suggestion of servility. Her apparently fixed expression was beyond criticism. It was alertly attentive, yet it seemed entirely blank of ordinary human emotions.

Behind the mask, however, emotions were raging, for Mary understood at last. Yes, she understood just what she had done, just what she had gained, just what she had lost, just how it must all be regarded by the conventional mind, and, more than all, just what she must pay!

Because she would pay! Only death itself could defeat that purpose. If this was the only way in which she was to be permitted to pay, so be it! The process might take forty years, or more. It might cost her everything she might otherwise have drawn from life, but—*she would pay!* Mary was young and really of the higher mind, and she took such things very seriously indeed.

She was not enough of a financier to understand that a debt of twenty-five thousand dollars can never be equitably canceled by an annual payment of six hundred dollars—which, of course, is not enough, by half, to pay a fair rate of interest on a loan of that amount. Her ignorance of business was no blemish upon her absolute honesty of purpose.

During these first two or three days, the Valmer household seemed to accept her in her new rôle. Mrs. Dwight had been greatly startled by her sudden appearance, and by the words that clicked from Mary's lips:

"Mrs. Dwight, I owe Mr. Valmer a considerable sum of money. I am unable, apparently, to pay it in any other way than by working for him. I am going to take Nora's place, and I am going to work at once. I do not wish to discuss this, or to have it discussed."

Nevertheless, Mrs. Dwight did discuss the matter at considerable length — with Barton, at least. Barton had a clew or two and several theories of his own, all of which he failed to air. To Mrs. Dwight's amazement, he seemed to view the situation as one which might occur almost anywhere, and he methodically set about instructing Mary in her new duties.

Elsewhere in the Valmer home, however, there raged emotions quite as violent as Mary's own. Mr. Fayles caught the brunt of them that first evening, on his return to Scarford. Ina captured him in the upper corridor and dragged him into the Dinsmore rooms, where a conference of a character now growing familiar was in session. Mr. Fayles heard, stared, exclaimed—and finally laughed.

"Is it *humorous?*" Edith demanded, and her eyes flamed. "Do you realize that she's met nearly half of our friends, and nearly all of the neighbors? Can you even picture what will happen when they come here and find her—find her—"

Mr. Fayles laughed again.

"D'ye know, somehow I think I admire Mary," he remarked.

"*Admire* her?" Ina blazed.

"Well, you started it, didn't you?" Fayles chuckled. "As nearly as I understand the turmoil just now, it must have been your hugely well calculated conversation that roused the kid. Now, it seems, father—"

"Oh, father's not a bit perturbed!" Ina cried. "We—we went to see father as soon as she appeared in her maid's clothes, Henry. Father explained it quite patiently. She feels that she's indebted to him, and she has no other way of repaying. Just a—matter of—course!" Ina choked.

"Yes—open and shut affair, seems to me, but—"

"Henry, father's demented. There's no other way of putting it—father has simply lost his mind. Anyway, I *didn't* start it!" Mrs. Fayles pursued spitefully, as her gaze settled upon the silent Mr. Dinsmore. "*He* conceived the bright idea of ousting her that way!"

"Yes, but—well, by gad, if I did—" that gentleman sputtered.

Mrs. Dinsmore broke in impatiently:

"Blaming Wells isn't going to help, and this is far from a joke, Henry. *You* are not particularly sensitive to ridicule; but when people begin to come, and Mary appears, helping Barton—he seems to have appointed her parlor maid—it's going to be unbearable. It's going to be the joke and the scandal of Scarford, and of everywhere else. We—we can't stand it!" concluded Edith, and tears of futile rage appeared in her eyes.

Mr. Fayles sobered, but did not seem greatly affected.

"Then the original great aim is still the great aim, eh—how to get rid of Mary?"

"Yes!"

"Why don't you ask your husband for another suggestion?" Fayles grinned.

"Heavens, no! He might have one!" Ina cried.

Mrs. Dinsmore glanced quite warmly at her sister.

"Well, that's not impossible. It's more than you seem to have, Ina!"

"Hey?" said the idler husband, and instantly brightened. "I say, that's rippin' of you, Edie! That's encouraging! Gives a man back his self-respect, that sort of thing does! Point of fact, I have one thing that seems not to have occurred to the rest of you."

"What, Wells?"

"What does one always do with a maid one doesn't want to have around?" Mr. Dinsmore queried easily. "One dismisses her!"

"Not this kind of maid," Ina said.

"I don't know why not. Father gives Mrs. Dwight absolute control over such things."

"But—"

"See here!" Mrs. Dinsmore said, with unusual briskness. "Nominally, I'm the female head of this household. I'll try that to-morrow."

She did. She summoned Mrs. Dwight in the later morning. Quite admirably, she simulated suppressed anger.

"Dwight—about the new maid, Mary."

"Oh, Miss Allers, ma'am? Yes, Mrs. Dinsmore?"

"No, not Miss Allers, Dwight—*Mary!* Dwight, I find her extremely inefficient. I find her also very much inclined to impertinence, and that's something, as you know, which I simply will not tolerate in any of the servants."

"Oh, but—" the housekeeper protested.

"Dismiss her, Dwight!" said Mrs. Dinsmore, and returned to her magazine. "At once, please."

There was always the possibility, you see, that this might work out much more neatly than had the other Dinsmore scheme for Mary's ousting. Unexpected things *do* happen now and then! How completely this one had failed to happen Edith learned when Barton brought word, an hour later, that her father desired her presence in the den.

"My dear," said Mr. Valmer, "there seems to be a peculiar and unaccountable hostility on your part toward Mary. Dwight tells me that you wish her dismissed. That is quite impossible."

"But, father, aren't you—aren't you capable of understanding that when our friends come here and see her—"

"She is quite presentable, is she not, as a maid!"

"Oh, decidedly, but—"

"I think there is nothing more to be said, Edith. I wished to mention it, and to tell you that Mary is to remain," Stephen said evenly. "That is all, Edith. Penning and I wish to get on with our work."

"The—the scheme for evolving more Marys?" Mrs. Dinsmore managed.

"Precisely—the scheme for evolving more Marys," said Stephen. "Will you close the door as you go out, Edith?"

His good humor was an established quantity nowadays. He even winked at Mr. Penning as he chuckled:

"Astonishing, eh?"

"I don't find it so," the attorney said, dryly and unexpectedly. "We're not all as independent of the world's opinion as yourself, sir. Beyond question, it will be embarrassing to Mrs. Dinsmore and Mrs. Fayles to be quizzed by their friends on the distinctly extraordinary thing of having the girl appear as a maid."

"They'll survive, I think," Mr. Valmer said. "It's not likely to be permanent, you know. At all events, I wasn't referring to that as the astonishing thing, Penning. Mary herself was in my mind. There's *character!*"

"Aha!" said Penning unenthusiastically.

"Character! Indomitable character, Penning—and *I* developed it! The girl is absolutely determined to pay off what she fancies to be her obligation, and in the only way she finds possible—absolutely! A little later, of course, I'll force her to listen to reason, but for the moment it's absorbing!"

"Aha!" said Mr. Penning once more.

"*Now!*" said Stephen brightly. "Where were we?"

So it came about that Mr. Fayles ran head on into another storm that evening, and it was a raging storm.

Mr. Fayles was tired, and less inclined to see the lighter side of things. He had, in fact, stretched out in the sun parlor for a refreshing cigarette when the Valmer daughters descended upon him, with Dinsmore trailing vaguely behind.

"She's still here!" Mrs. Dinsmore succinctly reported.

"Huh? Who? Mary?"

"Who else? I tried—"

"And failed?"

"Yes!"

"Enough said!" Mr. Fayles remarked impatiently. "Why don't you drop the confounded nonsense, anyway? Why don't you admit that the joke's on yourselves, and let it go at that?"

"Henry—" his wife began.

"Or, if that isn't what you want to do, why don't you rap the damned girl on the head, or put poison in her food, or hire somebody to shoot her from behind a bush?" Ina's husband snapped. "At least, don't bother me about it. I'm tired, and I'm thundering sick of it!"

Ina sat down beside him.

"My dear," said she, "do you quite understand that poor father's making arrangements to dispose of his fortune, and that this girl is the cause of it? Do you quite see that getting her out of the way is really our one chance of restoring him to sanity? You're not making a million dollars a year, Henry. If anything should happen to you, do you want me to be left penniless?"

"And Edie in the same way?" Dinsmore queried dutifully.

Mr. Fayles sat up with a jerk and gazed blackly at his wife.

"Is it really as serious as all that?" he demanded.

"It certainly is!"

"Then—then—here! If it has to be piled on my shoulders, all right! I'll attend to her! Just get out of here, and send the girl to me!"

"I'll stay and give you a hand," Mr. Dinsmore suggested.

"You get out with the girls!" Mr. Fayles barked. "Leave this to me!"

As one, they sighed their relief. They really had great confidence in Henry Fayles. And as one they trailed out again.

Mr. Fayles gnawed his small mustache and glared at the floor until Mary appeared with her quiet—

"Did you wish to see me, Mr. Fayles?"

"Eh? Yes, I did. Sit down here, Mary—want to talk to you. No—sit down!" said Mr. Fayles, so brusquely that Mary obeyed. "Now, see here, kid! This is just a little heart to heart talk, for your own good. Mary, you're not popular in this household—know that?"

"I am neither blind, deaf, nor imbecile," Mary replied. "I know that."

"And the very best thing for you to do will be just to pack up and leave quietly, Mary—the very best thing. Will you do that?"

"No!"

"Why not?"

"I think you're familiar with my reasons for staying, Mr. Fayles."

"Oh, that tommyrot! This is just between ourselves, Mary. You may be quite frank with me, and I mean to be with you. I understand that you flatly refuse to go?"

"I do."

"Then you force me to make a point which I had hoped to avoid. Unless you do go, and at once, you'll find things decidedly unpleasant, young woman!"

"They are not pleasant now."

"Well, they'll be a lot less so, I assure you," said Mr. Fayles, and there was something chilling about his laugh. "I'm on to your game, my girl!"

"My what?"

Mr. Fayles's smile came close to her. It was a brutish smile, and very ugly and relentless.

"It may interest you to know that I'm familiar with the law," croaked its owner, very impressively. "You are exercising a very baneful sort of undue influence on a senile old man, Mary. You are causing him to divert his fortune to channels apparently indicated by yourself. *That's criminal!*"

Mary offered no comment.

"Do I have to say any more, or shall I drive you down to the seven ten and put you aboard myself, bag and baggage?"

"I don't care to ride with you, sir."

"You'll go in the morning, then? Is that settled?"

"*No!*"

"Say, are you so brazen, so confident of your power over that helpless old man, that you will face criminal prosecution rather than leave your graft?" Mr. Fayles snarled.

Again Mary offered no comment for the moment.

Mr. Fayles expanded his chest and contracted his eyes until they were sparkling, devilish little slits.

"All right, then—so be it!" he hissed angrily. "I'll have a warrant for your arrest before—"

"Very well," Mary interrupted suddenly; "but meanwhile may I say that my duties do not include listening to futile abuse, Mr. Fayles? At least, I believe they do not. I'll ask Mr. Valmer and make sure, if you like. Is there something of importance that you wished to say—something connected with my work?"

Just then there was nothing at all that Mr. Fayles found it possible to say. Before he could open his next most promising line of attack, Mary was gone.

Mr. Fayles was still deep in the diversion of staring blackly at the floor when Dinsmore's head came cautiously around the edge of the doorway.

"Hah! Worked it, did you, old chap?" that gentleman cried. "I say, that's—"

"Say! What the—" Henry Fayles began violently.

He said more—much more. The essence of it Dinsmore repeated, very shortly, to his wife and her sister. Some of it, despite all their modernity, he did not feel justified in transmitting literally.

They held further discussion on the way home from a dinner dance, much later. They considered the Penning angle. Recently, they had all but forgotten the worthy Mr. Penning.

Edith watched for the lawyer next morning. Although Stephen Valmer doubtless desired his presence, Edith led him down a bypath.

"Mr. Penning, there's something very important—"

"About the girl, Mary, of course."

"You knew?"

"It's in the air," Mr. Penning said grimly. "Well?"

"Do *you* approve any phase of this heartbreaking absurdity?"

"Am I to be quoted?"

"Never!" Edith said promptly.

Mr. Penning removed his hat and fanned himself absently, the while considering the blue sky.

"No, I don't approve of any phase of it," said he. "I never have."

Mrs. Dinsmore clapped her delighted hands together.

"Why, we always assumed—we—why, that's splendid!" she cried. "You'll really help us to get rid of her?"

"In what way?"

"Well, you're a lawyer. You know how such things are managed, of course. It—it's poor dad's—er—eccentricity. The law provides for such cases, doesn't it?"

"You mean you want to have your father declared incompetent?" Penning asked baldly.

"Well—no, not exactly. That is, not if it means having him taken away and cared for. You know what I mean. Couldn't he—without any notoriety or unpleasantness—couldn't he be declared just incompetent enough to get him out of this, by a referee, or something like that?"

"He could not," Mr. Penning said quite cheerfully. "You see, the main objection is that your father's not crazy or incompetent. He's just enthusiastic, and he has to have an outlet. His business was, Mary is, the outlet."

"Then you're not going to help us?" Mrs. Dinsmore faltered.

The attorney glanced around and lowered his voice.

"I can't say; but I can make a suggestion. Every man has his price, I've understood. The same rule probably applies to a woman."

"Buy her off, you mean?"

"Well, good Lord! Hasn't that ever occurred to any of you?" demanded Mr. Penning.

"Actually, no."

"Well, well! Shows how easily too much anxiety may send one shooting straight past the solution of a problem, doesn't it?" the attorney sighed, and apparently dismissed the whole matter. "I must run on to work now."

"But how much shall we offer her?" Edith asked quickly.

"How much have you got—how much that can be spent without your father's hearing of it?"

"Not so very much."

"Offer her that, then, and see how it works out," Mr. Penning said serenely. "And remember, please, that this is a little affair of which—under oath, if necessary—I shall feel compelled to deny all knowledge."

Edith was almost courteous to Mary as she entered and passed that young woman, who was intent on the polishing of a little lacquer table in the corner. Ina, later, was almost courteous, too, even though she had just telephoned to cancel the evening's engagement for all four of them. There was to be an emergency session of the ouster group this night.

Held behind locked doors, it was a far more cheerful session than several of its predecessors. At last the promise of success seemed to be glowing brightly. They settled down to business.

"This thing will take real money," Mr. Fayles propounded. "That little crook's not out for small stakes!"

"Yes, but how much real money?" Dinsmore asked nervously. "I've been spending some, you know. Take five thousand dollars away from me now, and you'd leave me a pauper, so far as ready cash is concerned."

"We'll take it, anyway," Ina's husband said, smiling unfeelingly; "and I suppose I'll have to chip in ten thousand on my own account. Hate like sin to do that just now, too. I've been on the wrong side of the market for a month, and—well, never mind that. How about you girls?"

"Well, we're not going to endow her—not going to make her independently wealthy, are we?" Ina asked sharply. "It seems to me—"

"Well, apart from what seems to you, my dear," Mr. Fayles interrupted, "how much ready cash have you that can be applied to this purpose?"

"I suppose, if—if it's really necessary to throw money away like that, another five thousand."

"Edie?"

"Well, must *I* put in five thousand, too?" Mrs. Dinsmore cried.

"You must if you want to play in this game," Fayles grinned. "It's all for the common good, and it's a mighty sound investment, you know. That's your contribution, eh?"

"Why, I suppose so. But it seems to me, too, that—"

"Edith," Fayles said impatiently, "a girl who will stand up and defy *me* as that one did is no piker! That makes twenty-five thousand, all told. Next item—this is all money that can be delivered, by check or otherwise, before noon, say, to-morrow?"

Apparently it was. Mr. Fayles looked the meeting over thoughtfully, and then rose, twitched down his vest, and cleared his throat.

"Am I to assume that I'm elected to do the job?"

"Yes," said his wife.

Mr. Dinsmore smiled broadly.

"Going to slip twice on the same spot, eh?" he reflected aloud. "I did that, too, you know!"

Mr. Fayles's smile was even broader and very confident.

"Money doesn't slip in a case like this," said he. "Just hang around here for a while."

(*To be concluded in the January number of* MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE)

A BALLADE OF GOOD RESOLUTIONS

IN framing resolutions, friend,
For January 1 why wait?
Bad habits one can surely end
Without delay for any date;
Their sway we all can abrogate,
And there is naught to say us nay,
If we but take our stand and state:
"A new year starts afresh each day!"

There is no reason to depend
On time, or place, or freak of fate,
If we our manners mean to mend
Before we find it is too late—
Unless in mere pretense we prate,
With no good faith in what we say.
For love, and likewise, too, for hate,
A new year starts afresh each day.

All powers within us we should bend
Our struggles to accelerate,
If we unfeignedly intend
To tread the narrow path and straight,
Our passions to subordinate,
And purer promptings to obey.
Why, then, I ask you, hesitate?
A new year starts afresh each day.

ENVOI

Procrastination is a bait
To catch the sluggard soul away;
But be this dinned into each pate—
A new year starts afresh each day!

Harold Seton

Nancy Gault's Daughter

SOME WOMEN PAY FOR WHAT THEY GET OUT OF LIFE, AND SOME LET OTHERS PAY

By Helen Geneva Masters

"ANOTHER cup of coffee, ma," said Bella, lazily handing her thick porcelain cup and saucer to the woman who sat, wearily hunched over in her chair, at the end of the old drop-leaf table.

Nancy tilted the pot forward, but only a thin stream of sediment dripped out.

"There ain't no more," she said, returning the cup.

"Why don't you ever make enough coffee, Lena?" complained Bella, addressing her pale, heavy-cheeked sister. "I've just got to have my coffee. I can't stand up behind the counter all day, and then go to a dance at night, without an extra cup."

Lena quietly rose, and, adding more coffee and water to the dregs, set the worn nickel pot upon the stove.

"Are you going to a dance to-night, Bella?" inquired Nancy, looking with interest and pride at her handsome, black-eyed daughter.

"You bet I am!" returned Bella, elated. "A swell place, too!"

Lena poked the fire to hurry the coffee. Bella would be in a rush.

"I suppose the floorwalker, or the advertising manager, is going to take you this time," hazarded Bella's brother-in-law, from the other side of the table.

"It's none of your business, Wade Carns!" snapped Bella. "I'm not trying to make any secret of it," she continued, unable to resist the satisfaction of describing her conquest. "You know the actor who's doing the magic at the Star Theater this week? Rajah Shere Ali, they call him, but that's not his real name. His real name is Rodney Mennard. Cute name, ain't it? Well, he came to the trimming counter this morning to get some braid for a fancy costume, and we got to kiddin'. He gave me a ticket to the show, and he said if I'd wait till after his act a little bit, he'd come after me, and we'd go up to the Riviera Gardens and have supper and a dance."

Bella paused to sip the coffee that Lena had poured.

"It's his last night here," she went on, enjoying the flattering wonder of her mother and sister, and ignoring Wade's sarcastic sniffs. "To-morrow afternoon he's going on to California. He thinks maybe he can work into the movies out there. Gee, I wish I had a chance at that! If I'd only got acquainted with that guy a little earlier!"

"Twenty-four hours ought to be time enough for a girl like you to cinch him," exclaimed Wade, quickly following her thought.

Bella was too absorbed in the possibilities of her triumph, and too accustomed to Wade's gibes, to give him a return shot.

"I told Lucille about my date with him, and she wouldn't believe it till I showed her the ticket," Bella rattled on. "Lucille's some friend, though—lent me a cape trimmed with monkey fur to wear to-night. Just wait till I'm ready! Mrs. Duke Darcy'll have nothing on me!"

"How did Lucille get a fur-trimmed cape?" asked Lena, agape.

"There you go, always wanting to know every last detail!" answered Bella, irritated. "I didn't ask her how she got it. I'm just going to wear it to-night. It 'll be returned in the morning, and nobody will know the difference. When you go to a swell place, you've got to dress swell. And I've got the duds, all right—black satin pumps like Mrs. Dr. Loomis's, a Canton crape gown just like Mrs. Barton Smith's—gosh, wouldn't she be mad?—and a hat with a big swooping feather, the same style exactly as Mrs. Judge Kane's."

"I know you'll look swell, Bella," said Nancy, with admiration. "You know how to get things on. When I was ironing at Mrs. Felkner's to-day, and she stepped in all dressed up for an afternoon tea, I just thought what a shame it was to see fine clothes wasted on a figure like hers."

"Yes," replied Bella, finishing her coffee. "She'll always look tacky. She hasn't any taste. Yesterday she was ordering gold lace to be sent to her dressmaker. Lord, I could have told her she'd look like a withered carrot in gold lace—her with no life in her eyes, her half gray hair, and her muddy skin! But"—Bella shrugged her shoulders—"it's the fashion. One must keep up with the style. Gosh, I must be getting ready!" she exclaimed, glancing at the clock, and quickly rising from the table.

Lena stacked the cheap, crackled plates and put the worn knives and forks into the dish pan. Wade, rising, drew six silver dollars from his pocket, and handed them to Nancy.

"This pays for Lena's keep and mine this week," he said.

"All right," answered Nancy, taking the money. "Too bad Lena couldn't make a good match, like Bella's going to," she added. "If it hadn't been for you, Wade—"

"Oh, I never would have been like Bella," interrupted Lena. "I never was pretty, or had easy ways like hers."

"Easy ways!" scoffed Nancy. "Huh, I suppose you ain't forgot your marriage notice was three months late!"

With this concluding thrust the older woman shuffled into the front room.

Lena's tears dripped down her flabby cheeks, but her chin remained taut.

"Darn it!" growled Wade, taking the dish towel. "I don't mind what she says to me. I guess I deserve it; but Lord knows you don't!"

"I wouldn't care if it didn't hurt you, Wade," returned Lena. "I'm used to getting jolts. It's ma's way. You see, I never could hold a candle to Bella, and of course ma's always been wrapped up in her. It's no wonder—Bella's so smart and so good-looking. She ain't a bit like any of the rest of us."

"That's so," assented Wade. "Her tongue's sharp, like her ma's, but she doesn't look like any of you. Like her father, I suppose."

"Oh, no—not a bit," replied Lena. "Pa was light. The rest of us are like him. She's just different, and I guess she's mighty glad of it when she looks at us."

"You must have had a life of it, between her and your ma," commented Wade, drying the last chipped dish. "Here's five dollars, the rest of my pay check. Salt it down with what we've saved. We'll get out of here some day."

He laid the bill upon the table.

"There'll be no getting out of here till after the baby's come, Wade," returned Lena. Hope had offered her straws before. "Babies come expensive."

"Don't worry, Lena," Wade said in a kindly tone. "I'm due for a raise before long."

He helped her to set away the decrepit china, and together, with the five dollars snugly folded in Lena's hand, they slipped past Nancy and upstairs to the only four walls on which they had a claim.

Of course Nancy knew when they passed through the room, but as she had Wade's evening paper, it was as well not to lift her eyes. Besides, she was too deeply absorbed in the latest lurid sensation to give a thought, just then, to the drama of her own household.

"It takes money and position to make a fuss like that," she mumbled, turning the pages for a continuation of the story of a child's disputed paternity. "With folks like us, the man would just keep still, or go away, or maybe fight it out with his fists."

A banging door upstairs aroused her.

"Ain't it time you was starting, Bella?" she called.

"I'm coming now," answered Bella, as a heavy perfume, excessively sweet, like that of a tuberose, descended the stairs.

Nancy pushed back to let her daughter stand in the light. A much less interested spectator would have been impressed, if not awed, by the perfect grooming and fashionable ensemble of this precocious daughter of the shops.

The girl was perhaps a trifle overdone to be a product of a beauty parlor of the highest class; and yet her sparkle, her youth, her vitality, glowed through her make-up, so that criticism of her slightly over-rouged cheeks, or her eyebrows translated into a thin penciled line, would have been understood as envy. Nancy gazed enraptured. From the becoming hat set ostentatiously upon Bella's carefully arranged hair, down the trim lines of her lustrous wrap to the narrow toes of her satin slippers, her mother's eyes traveled with unmixed approval.

Bella threw back her cape, lined with green satin, to display her silk gown, caught in drapes at the sides with oriental buckles. As Nancy gazed, it seemed as if even in her there moved a little of her daughter's sparkling dash, as if the fire of her youth flashed up before the embodiment of her early ambitions, or as if she vaguely perceived in Bella a projection of herself.

"When I was young," remarked Nancy, "I used to wish for fine clothes like them. Nobody knows how I wanted them. If I'd ever had a good chance, I might have stole to get them; but," she sighed, having surrendered to destiny long ago, "I never had the looks to go with swell duds."

With the back of her rough hand she touched the soft folds of Bella's gown, and caressed the silky nap of the borrowed cape.

"You ought to be going in a taxi," she said, as the girl turned to the door.

"I'll be coming back in one, believe me!" laughed Bella.

"You'll soon cook your goose if you have him stop in front of this house," Nancy warned.

"I ain't no such fool as that, ma," retorted Bella, as if her intelligence had been questioned. "Of course, if Mennard is along, I'll get out at the Adams Apartments—two blocks over on Harney, you know."

"Well, run along. I guess you can look after yourself," replied her mother.

II

WITH the glow of pride still warming her lop-sided heart, Nancy sank back into her chair to read the concluding chapters of "The Arab Chief," which was running in the evening paper. She was soon so lost in the melodrama that she failed to notice a knock at her door. A second louder summons, however, brought her gingerly to the threshold.

"Mrs. Gault?" inquired the harmless-looking man in front of her.

"Yes—what are you wanting?" she asked.

"I'm from the Whitcomb store, madam," he said. "I must speak with you a few minutes."

Nancy stood dazed as the man entered and sat down by the table. She returned to her chair and anxiously faced him.

"Mrs. Gault," he began, "you have a daughter named Bella?"

"A fine girl," she answered, at once on the defensive.

"She has been working at the trimmings counter in our store for about a year, I believe," he continued.

"She's the smartest salesgirl there," commented Nancy vigorously. "There ain't a girl in the department that's made more than half the sales she has in a year!"

"That's true," agreed her visitor, willingly enough. "That's one reason why they'd like to keep her. She *is* clever. She's beat the store out of two hundred dollars' worth of goods, and with the connivance of another girl she's borrowed hats and wraps whenever she wished. We usually catch a girl at her second attempt, but we've had to trail Bella for six months!"

"It ain't true," asserted Nancy, but her eyes fell.

"Of course I brought proofs," said the man, drawing an envelope of papers from his portfolio. "Here's a bill for two fifty—hose, charged to Mrs. Freeman, one of our customers who has a charge account. Mrs. Freeman was in Florida when this bill was made."

He laid the paper before Nancy, and she dumbly looked at it.

"Here's a bill for eight dollars," he continued, "for a blouse, also charged to Mrs. Freeman. You may recall a black beaded waist Bella has been wearing. Then here's silk underwear, fifteen dollars, charged to Mrs. Horn. Really, Mrs. Gault, have you never wondered how a shop girl could afford to have silk lingerie?"

"They all wear it," answered Nancy. "Can't they buy it cheap at the sales?"

"It's never very cheap, Mrs. Gault—certainly not the kind Bella fancies," he replied. "Lately, she's been more daring. You probably noticed the satin slippers she was wearing to-night. During her lunch hour she took the elevator to the shoe department, and, with the lofty airs of a duchess, she had these fifteen-dollar shoes fitted and charged to Mrs. Bainbridge. She'd have got away with it, too, if I hadn't been trailing her from the moment I saw a vaudeville artist talking with her this morning. After getting the shoes, she transferred her grand manner to the dress department, and actually got that fifty-dollar gown charged to Mrs. Harrison Myers.

The cape and hat she has on were borrowed through Lucille Glover, one of Bella's tools. Now, Mrs. Gault," the visitor continued, after showing Nancy all the charge slips, "you know, of course, that this is a penitentiary offense."

He paused, and looked sharply at Nancy. She was staring at him like a scared rabbit.

"The store has been unusually generous in this instance, Mrs. Gault," he began. "If you will sign this note for two hundred dollars, they will keep Bella, retaining half of her wages each week until the amount is paid—with interest, of course."

"Two hundred dollars!" cried Nancy. "I'm a poor working woman. I don't make but thirty-five cents an hour."

"But, don't you see, Bella will have to pay it," he explained. "What the store wants you to do is to keep Bella on the job and make her go straight. If you don't sign this, we'll have the girl arrested at once. We could have put our hand on her any minute since she bought those satin pumps this afternoon. The store would rather have the money than her arrest, but the choice lies with you."

Nancy glanced over the note which he placed before her, and, with his fountain pen, dully inserted her name in the designated space. He made out a copy of the note for her, and packed his papers away in his portfolio.

"Now, Mrs. Gault," he said, rising, "it might be just as well if Bella did not know that you have signed this note. When she comes to work in the morning, we expect to give her quite a grilling before we offer the opportunity to stay and repay on the terms I have explained to you. We think a scare will do her good. Probably, if she knew you had signed the note, she wouldn't be alarmed."

"I ain't anxious to mention it to her," answered Nancy wearily.

"Good night, Mrs. Gault," said the visitor civilly, and, opening the door, let himself out.

Nancy sat stupidly reading the copy of the note over and over. Her head nodded drowsily as the day of toil began to demand its toll of rest. At length, unable to resist the impulse, she leaned over on the table and relaxed in sleep.

From her inert fingers dropped the oblong paper, to lie, a conspicuous yellow patch, upon the floor.

Bella, returning at three in the morning, was surprised to find the light still burning in the dingy living room. She stepped in quietly without disturbing her mother's heavy breathing. It was very unusual to have any one wait up for her. She looked around suspiciously.

At her feet lay the sacrificial note. She stooped for it, and even to her slightly blurred senses the meaning was clear. She laid it down cautiously, and, sliding her feet out of her slippers, went up the creaking stairs as noiselessly as possible.

III

On the following evening Nancy shuffled home, old with the age that has relinquished its last mirage of youth. The shabby little house, with its sagging porch, its bare, frozen plot in front, and its sullen windows, seemed all of a piece with her life. Yet there was no sympathy between them—the door knob was cold in her hand.

The kitchen table was laid, as usual. Wade sat near the light, reading the paper to Lena, while she turned the meat as it browned. Nancy hung up her wraps on the hook on the door, and sank into her chair.

"Shall I dish up the supper, ma?" asked Lena. "Bella ain't come yet."

"Set it on," said Nancy.

The meal passed quietly. The older woman rested her head on her hand and leaned on her elbow, as if too much fatigued to sit upright. Bella's absence was unremarked until Nancy, refreshed by her food and hot coffee, noticed that the clock was striking seven.

"Bella ain't come yet?" she asked, as if just waking to a new problem.

"She didn't eat breakfast this morning, either," said Lena. "I heard her upstairs, walking around, and then, when I was at the telephone, she called out, 'Good-by, Lena; I'm late—I'll get something at the store.'"

"Maybe she's boarding at the Riviera Gardens," suggested Wade jokingly.

"The store called up about two o'clock, to see if she'd come home," continued Lena. "They said she'd overstayed her lunch hour. They must be getting pretty particular."

"Something's happened!" exclaimed Nancy, several different fears clutching her simultaneously. "She might have jumped off the Douglas Street Bridge! Give me the paper!"

She snatched the printed sheets, and glanced nervously over the headlines. In the Douglas Street Bridge it seemed that the city had provided an easy way for any who wished to seek oblivion. The eddying currents of the Missouri seldom surrender a body once beneath their opaque water.

Wade, vaguely alarmed by Nancy's unusual tension, beckoned to Lena and hurried up the stairs before her.

In Nancy's confusion the loose pages of the paper became strewn about the floor. She turned them over and over, not knowing which she had examined and which not. She happened upon the column of births, deaths, and marriages—the small print of life. Among the births Bella had once figured—an ordinary line.

Nancy's eyes searched the deaths, half expecting to see Bella's name there. She did not find it. Her eye ran farther down the column, into the list of marriage licenses; and there, as if she had dreamed it, were the names of Bella Gault and Rodney Mennard. Not far away was a brief paragraph stating that Bella and Rodney had been married by the Rev. Stephen Sivil, and that this was his two-thousandth ceremony.

"Ma, her clothes—all her good ones—are gone!" cried Lena excitedly, coming down the stairs.

"And the money we'd saved is gone, too!" angrily shouted Wade, rushing toward Nancy. "I'll tell you what Bella is—she's a thief!"

"Suppose she is!" snapped Nancy. "How much better are you? Stealing money ain't the worst kind of stealing there is. Read that, Lena," she said, leaving Wade to gnash his teeth if he liked. "She's married respectable, anyhow!"

Lena read aloud the license notice and the report of the Rev. Stephen Sivil's matrimonial record.

"Married to that actor fellow!" exclaimed Lena. "I suppose she went away with him this afternoon. You know she said he was going to California."

"And I reckon our money paid for her ticket!" blustered Wade.

IV

The weeks passed monotonously. Every morning Nancy wrapped her work clothing into an untidy newspaper parcel, pinned on her shapeless hat, fumbled her way through the ragged lining of her coat sleeves, slipped a car check into her grimy mitten, and passed out into the street. At night the house received her as one inanimate object receives another. Her chief concern now seemed to be to keep up her regular remittances to the Whitcomb Store.

One afternoon, while she was ironing a roll of handkerchiefs, Mrs. Dupoint, her employer, stepped into the room.

"I will pay you now," said Mrs. Dupoint, "for I am going out. I suppose another hour will finish the work?"

"Yes," answered Nancy, calculating the number of damp garments in the basket.

Mrs. Dupoint laid the money on the end of the ironing board.

"You'll be back Monday for the wash?" she inquired.

"No," said Nancy. "I don't expect to be back, Mrs. Dupoint."

"No? Why, Nancy!" she exclaimed, reviewing mentally, perhaps, the tedious search for a capable laundress. "I'm willing to pay you as much as any one would, Nancy."

"I'm quitting all of it, Mrs. Dupoint," replied Nancy. "I wouldn't have worked so long, only I was paying up a bill for Bella—one she made before she went away. You know she's got a part in a movie now. It won't be long till you'll see her name advertised. I always knew Bella was extra smart. You remember her, don't you? She used to be in the trimmings at the Whitcomb."

"Yes, indeed," returned Mrs. Dupoint. "A good many of us always left the selection of trimmings to Bella. There doesn't seem to be any one who can take her place."

"No—they'll never find another girl like Bella," Nancy emphasized their loss.

"And so she's in the movies!" mused Mrs. Dupoint. "I suppose she'll see to it that you live on Easy Street the rest of your life?"

"Me? Oh, no!" said Nancy, surprised. "Bella sends me *Film Features* every week, but I'm not expecting anything of her. I'm going to live with Lena and Wade. The baby's a year old now."

Mrs. Dupoint thought she understood.

"I suppose you feel that Lena needs you," she said.

"Well, I don't look at it exactly that way," Nancy rejoined. "I've always given Lena a home, and now I'm old I reckon she owes me a home."

"You've been a widow for a long time,

haven't you?" inquired Mrs. Dupoint, giving up the mystery of Nancy's partiality.

"I've been the same as a widow ever since Bella was a baby," Nancy explained. "The old man went away the night after she was born."

"How heartless! How could he do that?" exclaimed Mrs. Dupoint.

"Oh, he didn't like her looks, maybe," lightly suggested Nancy, taking a fresh bundle from the basket.

"Well, I can't understand the mental state of a man who could do such a thing!" declared Mrs. Dupoint with finality.

"No, I dare say you can't," Nancy replied. "Nobody ever seemed to understand, but of course people don't pay much attention to folks like us."

Her iron moved steadily back and forth, while her mind, roaming through the mazes of the past, knew well the key to the whole labyrinth.

"Well," she remarked, "I reckon I've paid full price for the satisfaction I've had out of life!"

Mrs. Dupoint went to answer the doorbell. Nancy continued to iron until every piece was finished.

Enchantment

SHOWING THAT A TRULY ROMANTIC DRAMA MAY BE PLAYED ON THE PROSAIC STAGE OF A BUSINESS OFFICE

By R. N. Wall

ON a crisp morning in September, John Senton rang for a stenographer. He sat in his private office behind a wide mahogany desk, his face, deeply tanned by the vacation from which he had just returned, in sharp relief against the window behind him. High-nosed, lean, square-chinned, it was a face to direct and dominate.

The office walls, covered with plain but expensive brown burlap, the furniture, built solidly of fine wood, the rich dark rug on the floor—all these reflected Senton's taste, which was for things at once beautiful and simple.

The door opened, and a girl stepped into the sunshine-flooded room—a graceful, sedate girl with a small, well-shaped head, held high. A ghost of a smile hovered upon her lips, as if, although sure of herself, she was not certain that she would please. Her large, clear eyes were violet blue, and her closely netted hair shone like jet in the sun—the most uncommon and most attractive combination of hair and eyes given to a woman. Her slightly arched nose and small features denoted pride and fastidiousness. Her mouth was small and red, as provocative as a flower and as close as a trap.

Senton rose, tall, still lithe and slender at forty. Something new and strange tugged astonishingly at his heart. He gave the girl his hand and placed a chair for her beside his desk.

"You are our new stenographer?"

"Yes—I'm Stella Waters."

"Is this your first position?"

The girl dropped her heavy eyelids, and opened them wide, with a swift, flashing smile.

"Almost. I have done substitute work only"—she named a firm or two—"since graduation. I am anxious to place myself permanently, and I hope I can please you."

Her voice was low and sweet, with a peculiar velvety intonation that was indescribably seductive. It seemed to Senton to call to something within him. He had the curious feeling that he had not only known her long ago, but had waited for her coming.

"I'm sure you will. This isn't a bad place to work. At least, I don't find it so!" Senton laughed. "I hope you will like it here."

He was not an impressionable person. He wondered why the girl attracted him so much. She was exquisitely fresh in a simple white blouse and a short dark skirt, but she was in no way beautiful.

"I'm sure I shall," the girl replied, and smiled again.

Senton turned to his papers, and began to dictate. Miss Waters wrote without hesitation, and without any request to repeat. After the interruption of a telephone call, she gave him his cue without being asked. When her pencil point snapped, she instantly substituted another ready-sharpened pencil from her lap. When the letters came to him for signature, Senton found them perfectly typed.

Midway of the morning, Senton's door opened to admit an elderly, black-garbed gentleman, tall, gaunt, and slightly stooped, with somewhat haughty aquiline features softened by wise and kindly blue eyes.

Senton sprang to his feet, for this was his partner, Blandon Reeves. Judge Reeves, as every one called him, had studied law at Charlottesville in his early days. Later he had made a good deal of money in oil and land speculation. Now, with part of his capital invested in the business which Senton managed, he liked to lean back and look on at life. He spent little time in the office, and he seldom interfered in details, but his wisdom and experience were infinitely valuable in larger matters. Personally, Senton felt toward him the affection of a son.

"You're looking fine, John," Reeves said warmly. "I'm sure glad you're back! I hate to be bothered about little things, and when you're away every one runs to me. I even had to hire a stenographer."

"Miss Waters? By Jove, that girl is a wonder! How did you get her?"

"She answered our advertisement. The old story—good family, orphan, no money. Bit uppish, seems to me."

"I don't think so at all. Most stenographers can spell, and some of them can punctuate, but she can actually paragraph properly. I want her to take all my letters in future."

"Help yourself," the judge grunted. "New broom, you know!" His wise old eyes twinkled as they swept over Senton's earnest face. "Haven't you worked enough for one morning? I want to hear about the fish you caught."

Senton laughed, and proceeded to tell of his vacation. Then the talk drifted into business matters far removed from stenographers or office details.

II

As the days went by, Senton was delighted to find that the efficiency of Miss Waters justified his expectations. Aside from the enthusiasm which she displayed in her work, and which would have made her priceless had she been cross-eyed and crippled, Senton was unaccountably moved by the personality of the girl.

His manifest interest was not lost upon the judge, who, though he spent few hours in the office, had the eyes of a hawk.

"You're spoiling that girl, John," he accused.

"I'm not," Senton hotly denied.

"Haven't you let her off early twice this week?"

"What if I have? She had finished her work."

"The others notice it, and it's bad for discipline."

"Discipline be damned!" Senton flushed beneath his tan. "I'm running this office. What's the sense of making a girl sit around on a bright afternoon when there is no work to be done? When the busy season comes, she'll often have to stay overtime. I do the same with the others. Didn't I let Miss Bates go early yesterday?"

"Did you? Gave her a gold pencil, too, I reckon?" asked the judge slyly. "Gave 'em all pretty steel erasers, didn't you?"

Senton checked his impulse toward anger, and forced himself to be amused.

"What a darned old granny you are!" he laughed. "I gave Miss Waters those things that she might do better work. There's nothing personal in it."

"Maybe not; but you can't tell when a girl's going to think it's personal. You aren't such a bad-looking bachelor, and I don't reckon you're more than fifteen years older than she is, and—"

"That's nonsense!" Senton was red now, but he clung to his temper. "Miss Waters is a fine girl, and the best stenographer I ever saw. I want to keep her contented."

"I reckon you'll succeed; but don't overdo it," advised the judge sapiently, and went his way.

The busy season advanced, and the work became heavy. Miss Waters was often late in finishing her work, and Senton had to wait to sign his letters. Their homes lay in the same direction, so it was natural for him to carry her part of the way in his car.

The judge was swift to comment on this new development. He drifted into Senton's office, his lean hands clasped behind his back, one of the thin panetelas that he affected protruding at a rakish angle from his mouth, like the bowsprit of a sloop.

" Riding around a lot with that girl, John?"

" I don't know what you mean by ' riding around a lot,' " Senton replied with dignity. " When we leave at the same time, I often carry her to her boarding place. It's right on my way."

" Thought I'd seen you!"

" Doubtless. Why not? What harm is there in it?"

" None at all, I reckon. Just looks—"

" It would be selfish and silly," Senton bristled, " when we come out of the office together, for me to step into my car and leave her on the curb."

" Just do it to be accommodating—no pleasure at all, hey?"

" Of course it's a pleasure!" snapped Senton. Exasperation strained his bronzed face. " It rests me, after a hard day, to lean back in the car and hear her talk. Ever notice what a lovely voice she has, with a sort of bead, or husk, on it?"

" I'll admit she's a soft-spoken little trick," agreed the judge gruffly; " but I should think you'd get enough of her in business hours. The sirens had sweet voices, too, I believe."

He strolled to the door, paused, and over his shoulder fired a parting shot.

" Reckon you'll be taking her to lunch next!" he snorted.

Senton's drawn face relaxed in a grin. As a matter of fact, it had occurred to him that it would be pleasant to lunch with Miss Waters.

III

THAT noon he made the offer diffidently. She accepted as frankly as a man might have done.

It did prove pleasant. Senton gave the order, and across the narrow table faced the girl, erect and trim in her blue serge suit, with a black velvet toque upon the smooth jet coils of her hair.

" Slip your coat off," he begged.

With a little smile she removed it, revealing her fine arms faintly pink through her sheer blouse. The simple act conveyed to Senton a delicious sense of intimacy, and her presence served to emphasize the usual loneliness of his meals. Their talk was light, inconsequential, of themselves—the first of many delightful talks they came to have at luncheon.

From the first moment when his heart had leaped at the sight of her dark eyes, Senton seemed under a spell. His head told him that no woman could be as clever, as charming, and as good as his heart conceived Stella Waters; but, all the same, he was bewitched.

Senton had experienced his passing love affairs. Débutantes had been dangled before him by scheming dowagers, for he was of good position and decently rich. He had run the usual gantlet of flirtations, and he had known the fine comradeship a woman can give, but at love it had been his pose and habit to smile.

Affection he granted, passion he feared and distrusted, but that perfect mating of soul and body, which is truly love, had never blessed him.

The idea that he was in love now hardly crossed Senton's mind. He admired Miss Waters tremendously; but, while in his own mind he acknowledged a certain amount of infatuation, it was only to smile at himself.

He was not an analytical person. He knew that it was a delight to be with the girl, and, being with her every day, he was content—until Lawrence Ogier came.

Ogier, whom Senton had engaged as a city salesman, was a personable chap of twenty-five or so, with dark, prominent eyes, a big blue chin like an actor's, and a shock of hair waved across his forehead. He had a flashing smile and the easy manners of a dancing man. He was a little too effusive, a little too boastful, but from the first he sold goods. He had a desk in the outer office, and it was natural for him to make friends with Miss Waters.

Their mutual interest, once perceived, rocked Senton to the foundation of his being. At last he knew his feeling for Stella Waters by the right name. Love had come to him late, and like a madness.

He was transfigured with wonder and obsessed by jealousy. Beneath his composed exterior he was in delight when Stella smiled upon him. He was horrified at his own feelings when she favored Ogier. He was like a man infected with some strange disease, at once terrible and divine.

As Ogier's attentions increased, Stella seemed to care less to be with Senton. Her demeanor in the office showed no change. She was still the capable, pleasant assistant, but in their personal relations she became reserved where she had been frank, hesitant where she had been ready.

The evenings that she could ride home with him from the office were less frequent; she had shopping to do, vague errands multiplied. Mysterious engagements intervened when he suggested lunch. In a dozen slight but unmistakable ways it was forced upon Senton that she no longer craved his companionship.

He reproached her with this, and she denied it utterly. She liked him just as well as she had ever done, and that was "very, very much." She had not changed, she insisted; yet her replies seemed evasive and her explanations strained.

Then, after Miss Waters had refused to go with him to the theater, he went with the judge and saw her with Ogier two rows in front. They were unaware of his presence, and their attitude toward each other seemed unquestionable. Through one act Senton endured watching the sweet curve of the cheek she turned toward Ogier, and the smooth sheen of her shoulder against the salesman's sleeve.

"I've got to get out," Senton whispered to the judge, as the curtain fell upon the first act. "Too hot in here. I can't stand it any longer!"

"You do look bad," Reeves admitted, his shrewd old eyes searching Senton's face. "Want me to go with you?"

"Of course not. I'll be all right as soon as I get out into the air."

Senton could not return to the theater. He tossed through a sleepless night.

The next morning, determined to know where he stood, he rang for Miss Waters. He dimly felt that time and place were wrong, but the man was so devil-ridden that he could not wait.

She came, smiling, fresh as the morning itself, in one of her sheer, exquisite blouses, and seated herself in her usual place, her notebook ready. Senton gazed at her. She was so trim, so right, so immaculate, from her polished Oxfords to her neatly netted hair, every raven strand smooth. His heart hammered. Desire clogged his throat.

"You won't need that just now." He motioned toward her notebook. The words came thickly. "What I want to say is personal. I have never admired any one so much as you. I have loved you since the day I saw you first. I must—"

The girl started to her feet. Surprise, alarm, distress filled her violet eyes.

"Don't!" she cried sharply. "Don't—"

"I must tell you," he insisted. "No one will ever love you better than I do. I am no longer young; but I am not poor, and all I have is yours. I love you so much that I must know."

"Oh, can't you see that you mustn't?" The girl's face was clouded with pain. "You hurt me! I—"

"But, Stella—"

"Stop, I say! Don't, don't touch me!"

And she was gone, leaving Senton with a sore and heavy heart.

"It's that damned Ogier!" he muttered to himself.

He had feared this. He was a modest man, and he had realized that in everything but wealth Ogier was the more likely to attract a girl.

After a time he rang again for Miss Waters. She came in slowly, apprehension in her eyes.

"Please don't look that way," Senton said, and strove not to "look that way" himself. "It's all right. Let's be friends and forget it."

"We must," she said, "if I am to stay. I do not know that I should—after this."

"You've known, from the first, haven't you?"

Her voice was like June honey, rich and sweet.

"Things are different when they've been put into words," she said.

"I shan't let them be different. You mustn't dream of going. We can still be friends. A man can't always control his thoughts, but he is master of his actions. Forget it—and forgive me!"

Their hands met in token of the bargain. Stella smiled faintly at him, Senton lit a cigarette, and the tension relaxed. Yet, in the days that followed, the desire that he had expressed stood between them and made both of them self-conscious.

IV

The judge noticed the change, and mentioned it.

"Got over your keenness for that girl, John?" he questioned. "Don't see you carrying her home any more. Young Ogier's sort of taken over the job, eh?"

" Why not?" Senton snapped, so fiercely that the judge was abashed. " They're young, and no doubt they suit each other. I admire Miss Waters just as much as ever. She is the finest girl I ever knew."

" Surely, surely," the judge soothed him. " Don't get mad, John. I was only joking; but she and Ogier do make a good-looking couple."

It was all bitterness for Senton. He did not spy, but he could no more help watching Stella and Ogier, when they were together, than he could control the pulsations of his heart. If they exchanged smiles, if their hands touched, it was to Senton as if a knife had pierced his flesh. Every curve of Stella's loveliness mocked him:

" This is not for you!"

His appetite began to play tricks, and he developed insomnia. He tried not to think of the girl, but she was never far from his mind.

Through it all he strove to betray nothing of his pain; but if it did not appear in word or act, the torture showed in his altered face.

Then, slowly, out of sleepless nights, out of his anguish and desire, out of love repressed and driven in upon itself, came a plan.

After a consultation with the judge, Senton summoned Ogier to his office. Waiting, he held himself by sheer will in a detached, exaggerated calm.

At a table in the corner Miss Waters bent over some papers that she was arranging. She wore one of her crisp white waists and a trim plaid skirt, short enough to reveal her graceful ankles.

As Ogier came in, he gave her a quick glance. Senton caught her slight nod, fancied that a deeper rose showed upon her clear skin, and noticed her old trick of opening her eyes very wide and letting her lashes suddenly veil them again as she smiled. To Senton this smile had always been like a draft of sweet and heady wine, and now, as he saw Ogier receive the same wonderful, tender look, his purpose stiffened within him.

" Ogier," he began, without preamble, " how would you like to go to South America?"

The young man was startled; so was Miss Waters. From the tail of his eye Senton saw her features sharpen in sudden strained attention.

" Why," said Ogier, shifting his weight, " I—just what do you mean, Mr. Senton?"

" Sit down," Senton ordered. His gaze beat squarely into the wide eyes of the younger man. " We're thinking of opening a branch in the Argentine. Our business there has grown steadily, and a big deal is pending that some one must look after at once. Perhaps I should send Westcott, but he's married, and a man traveling in South America shouldn't be hampered with a wife. How would you like it?"

Senton had not forgotten Stella. His every sense was on the alert for her reactions; but apparently Ogier had.

" I'd like it tremendously!" he asserted.

The young man's protuberant eyes sparkled, and Senton could fairly read his thoughts upon his smooth, sleek face. South American manager! A chance to show what he could do! And something in the man's eyes made Senton fancy that he was not uninfluenced by the thought of a liberal expense account, of the black eyes of Spanish *señoritas*, of southern wine.

" It would mean a doubled salary," Senton tempted, " and no limit to the future. It's a big field."

" I know; and I'm sure I could make good."

" I think so, or I should not suggest it."

" I'd be awful glad to go, Mr. Senton!"

Ogier pushed his hair back—a habitual gesture, and, to Senton, an annoying one.

" It would mean "—Senton's eyes were iron hard—" a stay of some years, if you made good. You couldn't be jumping back and forth. You are quite foot-loose?"

" Ye-s-s," stammered Ogier. " But—"

" But what? Are you not free?"

Senton's smile was devilish. As he shifted his gaze for a moment, he saw Stella's dark head drooping over her work like a withered flower. The nape of her neck was crimson.

" Are you not entirely free?" he repeated insistently.

" Oh, yes, entirely!" Ogier declared.

" Very well. We will arrange for your transportation and letter of credit. You sail Saturday."

" That's pretty short notice—" Ogier began.

He ran a nervous finger around his collar, which was perceptibly damp, although the room was not warm.

" The occasion is urgent. If you cannot be ready to go Saturday, say so."

"I can be ready, all right," Ogier answered hurriedly. "I was only thinking—I s'pose you'll want to give me some instructions, and I ought to talk over matters with the man who will succeed me."

"That will be Hearst. Go over any loose ends with him. I will see you in the morning, at ten, and go into the details of what you are to do."

"Thank you, sir," Ogier fawned. "I'll sure do my best. I—"

"Certainly!" Senton looked his contempt. "That is all now."

V

OGIER went, and silence filled the room. Senton, shuffling the papers before him, glanced stealthily at Stella. Her fingers moved, but her face and her body were like carven stone. Senton felt a mad exultation mingled with a sense of infinite loss. He had removed a rival he despised; but still more strongly he despised himself. He remembered David, and Uriah sent to the forefront of the battle. A line from "Reading Gaol" crept darkling into his mind, and beat with the maddening repetition of little hammers upon his brain:

For all men kill the thing they love—

Stella rose and faced him. Her face, which had flamed, was now dead white. Her great violet eyes were as brilliant and as cold as blue ice.

"Why did you choose Mr. Ogier for this?"

"I thought him best suited." Senton could not resist the added sneer: "He seemed glad enough to go!"

As the words spurted from his lips, he longed to recall them, to explain, to excuse, to justify himself; but the girl's stern coldness bastioned his own stubbornness. He was doing the best possible thing for the girl. Had Ogier been worthy, he would not have denied her; and, if he did not put her above anything in the world, she was better off without him.

Miss Waters slowly turned and left the room. Panic assailed Senton. This time, would she go? Had he lost her? He almost started up to halt her, but he checked himself. What could he say?

Ogier sailed on Saturday. Miss Waters continued her work as efficiently as a machine, coldly, quietly, never at fault, never human. Senton could have faced anger, tears, even hysteria, more easily. Anything in the nature of a crisis could have been met in some fashion, and it might have cleared the air; but against the girl's icy reticence the man was powerless.

In vain Senton strove to make the most of Ogier's absence. His forethought and kindliness never failed. He kept Miss Waters's work light, saw that she had every privilege and convenience, and surrounded her with a network of loving, if unexpressed, care.

At the same time he did not try to force the personal note. He asked her neither to lunch nor to drive. He could only wait and hope.

"You seem to have used good judgment in sending Ogier to the Argentine," the judge told Senton, as he looked over some of the young man's reports. "He sure is selling goods!"

"Yes—the letters he wrote at first were rather boastful, but he has justified them."

"Well," drawled the judge, "you can't always tell. Sometimes a barking dog does bite!"

The fact that Ogier was doing well helped a little to justify his deed to Senton; but when he looked at Miss Waters, his conscience hurt.

The girl grew thinner. Her face became pallid, and her hair seemed to lose something of its gloss and richness. Her great eyes, once so full of exuberant sparkle and the joy of life, were, for Senton, blank and cold. He recalled the maddening smile that she had at first for him—"swifter-sweeter than the lark," he had phrased it to himself—and his heart was sick within him. Only her mouth remained the same—small, red, alluring as a flower, and as close as a trap.

Senton strove to awaken the old sweetness of their early relations. He tried to be gay and witty over trifles. He went out of his way to do fine things about which Stella must know. He made changes in the office of which he knew she approved. He asked her advice on business matters. It made no difference; she was like a woman who, having been murdered, still walks.

The change in her was reflected in Senton, and the difference in his appearance, as well as in his relations with Miss Waters, was not lost upon the hawk-eyed old judge.

Reeves strolled into Senton's office one afternoon in April, lighted a long cigar with elaborate care, and, after a desultory conversation, broached the subject.

"John," he said lightly, but with a little catch in his throat, "I'm very old and very wise—and I've mended a lot of matters in my time. What's the trouble, boy?"

"Trouble? Nothing that I know of."

"John, you look ten years older than the day you came back from your vacation last September. You're getting gray and thin. Your voice is pitched high, your eyes glitter, you're a bundle of nerves. If you won't tell me what the trouble is, I'll tell you—it's that damned girl!"

He banged his hard old fist upon the desk. To Senton it was like the accusing trump of doom. He felt that his inhibitions were slackening, that it was useless longer to struggle or deny. The need for confession and counsel that is in all men surged up within him.

"Judge," he began chokingly, "in love no man should seek or give advice; but I must talk to some one, or, by God, I believe I shall go mad!"

Into the angry aquiline countenance of the judge came deep concern.

"Is it as bad as that, John?" he questioned gently. "Then let's talk it out."

He stretched out his thin hand and passed Senton one of his long black cigars.

"Light that, John," he said mildly, in the singularly soothing voice that he could so well employ. "I read a verse the other night—how did it go?

"We turn to tobacco for comfort, inspiration, and ease,
For solace in time of sorrow, reflection in days of peace—

"Poor poetry, but good sense, hey? Light that. Get yourself in hand, and let's hear the story." He thrust his own cigar at a rakish angle into the corner of his thin-lipped mouth. "Go on, John. We all have to talk sometimes."

"I don't suppose you can understand how I feel about Miss Waters, judge. You can't imagine—can't realize—"

"Suppose you waive that. Only those who have known can understand, but I haven't always been old. Go on—tell me just what the trouble is."

"The trouble is that I'm desperately in love with a woman who doesn't love me. I thought she did at first, but I was wrong. I fell in love with her at sight, and every day has made her dearer. I tried to ask her to marry me; she wouldn't even let me finish. I think I am going mad; and I don't know what to do."

The judge listened, hardly moving. At intervals he withdrew the cigar from his mouth and slowly blew smoke clouds toward the ceiling. Then, as Senton paused and sat with bent head, half ashamed that he had shown the depth of his passion, half eased that he had shared his burden, the judge said calmly:

"There are two kinds of fools—the man who gives advice and the man who won't take it. If I consent to be the one, don't you be the other. I advise you to get Miss Waters another position at once."

"I can't let her go! I'd rather have the torture of seeing her, even knowing that my love is hopeless, than to have only the memory of her. I have enough bitter memories now—of the days when she was different!"

"And the poets teach that only youth can love!" exclaimed the old man. "I am not sure, though, whether this is love or madness!"

"Neither am I." Senton's tone was hard. "I fear that late love is the madness of a fool!"

"What is it about this girl that appeals to you so?"

"I don't know—just her personal charm for me."

"Of all qualities, charm is the most certain to inspire love," mused the judge. "A beautiful woman who is stupid is like a Ben Davis. A clever woman who is ugly reminds me of a crab apple; but a woman of charm is like a winesap. When I used to grow apples in Albemarle, it was the winesap I loved the best. How far away that seems!"

Senton did not heed his maundering.

"She is the most wonderful person in the world," he declared. "She is the only woman I ever loved or can love."

"John, you talk arrant nonsense," said the judge testily. A cynical smile passed across his weathered face. "Fundamentally, women are alike as peas in a pod. You are obsessed with mere glamour. Enjoy the woman once, and the glamour is gone. She is merely one pea in a pod."

"That is a false and a damnable doctrine!" cried Senton.

"Hush, hush!" the judge soothed him. "It is true, but you do not want the truth. No—it is merely a truth, and the converse is equally true; but a lover doesn't want metaphysics. What one thing about this woman draws and holds you so strongly?"

"Her steadfastness—and, I think, her smile."

The judge smiled that slow-spreading, wonderfully wise and kindly smile of his own. It illuminated his bleak and craggy face as sunlight gilds a weather-beaten rock.

"She must be fine, John, for you to care so much. I see only one way in which you can conquer."

Senton leaned forward eagerly.

"And that—"

"Conquer yourself!" The judge thrust a lean finger into Senton's face, and his voice crackled. "Be a man! Give her up, get rid of her, forget her!"

"I can't!" groaned Senton, sinking back. "I've thought of her until her image is interwoven in the fibers of my brain, infiltrated into the corpuscles of my blood. Without her life is worthless."

"So you think now, John. Were you a weaker man, I might suggest a different remedy; but for you there is only the fine and noble way. To every man there comes one supreme grapple between duty and inclination. Give her up!"

"I can't."

"Yes, you can. You're a man. If you cannot win this girl, you can gain happiness through renunciation."

"You are a sorry comfort, judge," Senton said, and rose.

He felt the need of a movement, and his long legs bore him to the street. The judge's words had implanted no new idea, but they had served to crystallize what had been struggling beneath his consciousness. If he could master his desire, the strength gained in his own sight might prove some compensation.

He turned into a telegraph office, and, without letting himself think—writing the dispatch like a man who nerves himself to commit suicide, and who drives every idea from his mind save the determination to pull the trigger—he cabled Ogier to return by the first available steamer.

VI

The next morning Senton entered the office earlier than usual. Another sleepless night had left his face drawn and old. Stella Waters, talking with another girl, was in the outer office, on her face the smile that Senton so loved. As the girls heard his step and turned their heads, Stella's smile was erased as swiftly as a boy sponges a slate. She gave him a chill, impersonal good morning.

"I want you," he muttered as he passed.

Miss Waters followed him quietly into his office. Standing motionless, she waited, businesslike and contained.

"Sit down," said Senton dryly. "I wanted to tell you that I have cabled Ogier to come home."

He watched her face. Swift color leaped to her cheeks. Her eyes grew moist and bright. For the first time in months she vouchsafed him all the old sweetness of her smile. Then a look of alarm stole into her face.

"Why?" she questioned. "There is nothing wrong, is there? He has not failed in any way?"

"In none," said Senton. He strove to make his tone hearty, even essayed a ragged smile. "Ogier has done so well that I think he's entitled to a vacation. The rainy season is on down there, and I want to discuss matters with him. In fact, he has laid the foundations for future business so well that I think another man can carry it on. I expect to give him a good place here."

The girl regarded him intently for a moment.

"You can be very wonderful!" she said, and her low voice was rich as an ancient tune.

In the days that followed, Senton, in mingled delight and agony, saw the old light return to Stella's eyes, the luster to her hair. Her movements revealed an added grace, and her fuller face showed the tonic effects of hope and happiness. She became gay, jested easily, and, catching herself humming a waltz, would stop and redden. Senton was glad; and yet her heightened loveliness was like a sword in his side.

Then Ogier came.

It was May, and it was morning. Senton sat at his desk. He still slept badly, and his face, always lean, was worn and haggard. He was fine-drawn as a wire, mentally and physically, and upon his temples the gray had begun to powder his hair.

He reflected cynically that if the consciousness of a good deed is its own reward, it is often the only one. According to the moralist, he should have felt proud and exalted; actually, he had only the sense of futility, of emptiness, of age.

To him, as he sat motionless and grave as a Chinese joss, Ogier was shown. The young man advanced beaming, his hand outstretched. Senton could not refuse his own hand, but his smile was strained.

"How are you, Ogier? Good trip?"

"Fine! You're looking well, Mr. Senton"—a lie which Ogier regarded as flattering. "Mighty glad to see you and to be home again! South America's all right, but I wouldn't trade a corner lot here for the whole darned continent!"

"So you'd rather stay here than go back?"

"I'll say I would! I'm game to go where it's best for the business"—there was a touch of alarm in his unctuous tone—"but I gathered from the letter that followed your cable that you'd fix me up something in the States. Fact is, I had thought of getting married—"

Senton hid a spasm of pain.

"I congratulate you. I think Harper can carry on your work down there. I had in mind the St. Louis branch for you. That will remove any obstacle to marriage, and the salary will be as much or more than you get now."

"Mr. Senton, you're certainly one white man! You've done a heap for me. Say, I don't know how to thank you!"

"Don't try," said Senton shortly. "You've earned it. I'm only doing what is right."

To Ogier that seemed reasonable enough. He had no doubts of his own ability, or of the justice of his reward. That was evident, as he leaned forward in his chair, beaming and complacent.

His figure had stoutened with good living. He caressed his chin and swept back the swatch of hair across his brow—the gesture Senton so hated.

"You're just in," Senton said. "You'll want to see—people. Take the rest of the week off. Come down on Monday, and we'll discuss St. Louis."

"Thanks!" Ogier rose, and pushed out his chest. "I expect to see a heap of one little girl. She'll want to see me, too. I wish I could tell you how much we both appreciate—"

"That's all right," Senton broke in. "Enjoy yourself. We'll talk business on Monday."

The man gone, Senton for an instant sank his head in his hands. Then he straightened and rang his bell.

Stella entered, wearing a dress of blue serge, embroidered with scarlet threads, at once businesslike and tasteful. To Senton she had never seemed more lovely. Her deep violet eyes met him calmly, but her small red mouth seemed a little tremulous.

Senton spoke with an effort.

"Would you care to have the rest of the week off?"

The girl seemed surprised.

"I hadn't thought of it," she hesitated. "Why?"

"So that you may be with Ogier."

She looked at Senton, her lips mocking, her heavy-lidded eyes narrow. Her voice came, rich as cream:

"Why should I want to be with him?"

Senton stared in sheer amazement.

"Aren't you going to marry him?" he cried.

"Of course not!"

Senton started up.

"I don't understand!"

"Neither do I. Why did you think—I cared for Mr. Ogier?"

"Didn't you?"

The violet eyes dropped. The red mouth crinkled.

"He did amuse me; but even that was all over before he went away."

"Then why were you so hurt and angry because I sent him?"

"Not on his account—that's sure!" The girl's face was transfigured with sudden passion. "Was the thing you did when you sent him the act of a man you would expect me—to care for? You, whom I had so looked up to, so admired—how could I be certain that I knew you, after that? You spoiled everything!"

Her face was flame. She turned to fly, but Senton was between her and the door.

"But why," he demanded, "have you been so radiant since I recalled him?"

"Because you had come to yourself," she breathed. "You proved yourself—what I first believed you!"

"Then you mean that I have a chance?" cried Senton, his whole soul uplifted, but hardly daring to believe.

"You have always had a chance," she whispered. "I wanted only the right words at the right time!"

His hungry arms swept around her.

The door opened, and the face of Blandon Reeves, thin, high-nosed, aquiline, appeared. For an instant the old judge stared. Then over his weather-beaten features came his gently wise, comprehending smile; and he softly closed the door again.

Timeworn Town

THE STORY OF THE STRANGE MURDER MYSTERY IN HISTORIC HATHELSBOROUGH

By J. S. Fletcher

Author of "The Town of Crooked Ways," "The Harvest Moon," etc.

XXVII

BRENT glanced from the new witness, a quiet, reserved-looking man of middle age, to Simon Crood. There was a dark scowl on the prisoner's heavy features, and, Brent fancied, a look of apprehension. Once more Simon beckoned to his solicitor, and exchanged a few whispered words with him across the front of the dock, before turning to the witness. And to him Brent also turned, with an instinctive feeling that perhaps he held a key to those mysteries which had not yet been produced.

He gave his name as Matthew James Nettleton, member of the Society of Accountants and Auditors.

"Mr. Nettleton," said Meeking, "you are borough accountant of Hathelsborough, are you not?"

The witness folded his hands on the ledge of the box and shook his head.

"No!" he answered. "Was!"

"Was? What do you mean?"

"I have resigned my appointment."

"When?"

"Yesterday—at six o'clock last evening, to be precise."

"May I ask why?"

"You may, sir. I resigned because I knew the inquiry just held by the inspector of the Local Government Board to be an absolute farce—because I know that the financial affairs of the borough are rotten ripe—because I utterly refuse to be a cat's-paw in the hands of the town trustees any longer. Those are my reasons."

Tansley dug his elbow into Brent's ribs as an irrepressible murmur of surprise broke out all around the court. Brent was watching the men in the dock. Krevin Crood smiled cynically, and the smile developed into a short, sharp laugh. Simon's flabby face turned a dull red, and presently he lifted his big silk handkerchief and wiped his forehead.

Meeking waited a moment, letting the witness's outburst have its full effect. Then, amid a dead silence, he leaned toward the box.

"Why didn't you say all that at the recent inquiry?" he asked.

"Because it wouldn't have been a scrap of good," retorted the witness. "Those affairs are all cut and dried. My only course was to do what I did last night—resign—and to give evidence now."

Meeking twisted his gown together and looked at the magistrates. He ran his eye carefully along the row of faces, and finally let it settle again on his witness.

"Tell their worships, in your own fashion, your considered opinion as to the state of the borough finances," he said. "Your opinion based on your experience."

"They are, as I said just now, absolutely rotten," declared Nettleton. "It is seven years since I came to this place as borough accountant. I found that, under an ancient charter, the whole of the financial business of the borough was in the hands of a small body known as the town trustees, three only in number. It is marvelous that such a body should be allowed to exist in these days. The town trustees are responsible to nobody. They elect themselves. That is to say, if one dies, the surviving two elect his successor. They are not bound to render accounts to any one. The town council, of which they are a permanent committee, only knows what

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they choose to tell. This has gone on for at least three centuries. It may have served some good purpose at some period, under men of strict probity, but in my opinion, based on such experience as I have been able to command, it has of late years led to nothing but secret peculation, jobbery, and knavery. As regards my own position, I have never at any time been permitted to see any accounts other than those placed before me by the town trustees. My belief is that no one but themselves actually knows what the financial condition of the town really is. I am of impression that this borough, as a borough, is bankrupt!"

There now arose a murmur in court which the chairman and officials found it difficult to suppress; but curiosity prevailed over excitement, and the silence was deep enough when Meeking got in his next question:

"You affirm all this in face of the recent inquiry?"

"I do—and strongly. The accounts shown at the recent inquiry were all carefully manipulated and arranged by the town trustees. I had nothing to do with them. They were prepared by the town trustees — chiefly, I imagine, by Mallett and Coppinger, with Crood's approval and consent. They were never shown to me. In short, my position has been this—I have had certain accounts placed before me by the town trustees, with the curt intimation that my sole duty was to see that the merely arithmetical features were correct, and to sign them as accountant."

"Could you not have made a statement to this effect at the inquiry?"

"I could not."

"Why?"

"Because I could not have produced the books and papers. All the books and papers to which I have ever had access are merely such things as rate books and so on —the sort of things that can't be concealed. The really important books and papers, showing the actual state of things, are in the possession of Mallett and Coppinger, who, with Crood, have never allowed anybody to see them. If I could have had those things brought before the inspector, I could have proved something; but I couldn't bring them before the court of inquiry. You can bring them before this court."

"How?" demanded Meeking.

"Because, I take it, they bear a very sinister relation to the murder of the late mayor," replied the witness. "He was as well aware as I am that things are all wrong."

"You know that?"

"I know that he did his best, from such material as he could get at, to find out what the true state of things was. He worked hard at examining such accounts as were available. To my knowledge, he did his best to get at the secret accounts kept by the town trustees. He failed, and they defied him. Yet, just before his murder, he was getting at facts in a fashion which was not only unpleasant but highly dangerous to them, and they were fully aware of it."

"Can you give us an example of any of these facts—these discoveries?"

"Yes, I can give you one in particular. Wallingford was slowly but surely getting at a knowledge of the system of secret payment which has gone on in this place for a long time, under the rule of the town trustees. He had found out the truth, for instance, as regards Krevin Crood. Krevin Crood was supposed to be paid a pension of one hundred and fifty pounds a year. In reality he was paid three hundred pounds a year. Wallingford ascertained this beyond all doubt, and that it had gone on ever since Krevin Crood's retirement from his official position. There are other men in the borough, hangers-on and supporters of the town trustees, who benefit by public money in the shape of pensions, grants, or doles. In every case the actual amount paid is much more than the amount set down in such accounts as are shown. Wallingford meant to sweep all this jobbery clean away."

"How?"

"By getting the financial affairs of the town into the full and absolute control of the mayor and the town council. He wanted to abolish the town trustees as a body. If he had succeeded in his aims, he would have done away with all the abuses which they not only kept up, but encouraged."

"Then, if Wallingford's reforms had been carried out, Krevin Crood would have lost one hundred and fifty pounds a year?"

"He would have lost three hundred pounds a year. Wallingford's scheme included the utter abolition of all these pensions and doles, lock, stock, and barrel."

"And the town trustees—Crood, Mallett, Coppinger—were fully acquainted with his intentions and those of his party?"

The witness shrugged his shoulders.

"That's well known," he answered. "They were frightened of him and his schemes to the last degree. They knew what it meant."

"What did it mean?"

Nettleton glanced at Simon Crood, and smiled.

"Just what it has come to, at last," he said. "Exposure and disgrace!"

"Well!" said Meeking, when a murmur of excited feeling had once more run around the court. "A more particular question, Mr. Nettleton. Did the late mayor ever come to your office in the course of his investigations?"

"He did, frequently. Not that I had much to show him; but he carefully examined all the books and papers of which I was in possession."

"Did he make notes?"

"Notes and memoranda—yes. At considerable length, sometimes."

"What in?"

"In a thickish memorandum book, with a stout cover of red leather, which he always carried in his pocket."

"Could you identify that book if you saw it?"

"Certainly! Besides, you would find it full of his notes and figures."

"That will do for the present, Mr. Nettleton—unless my friend here wants to examine you. No? Then I will recall Superintendent Hawthwaite for a moment. Superintendent, you have just heard of a certain pocketbook which belonged to the late mayor. Was it found on his dead body, or on his desk, or anywhere, after the murder? No? Not after the most careful and thorough search? Completely disappeared? Very good! Now let us have Louisa Speck."

A smartly dressed, self-possessed young woman came forward. Tansley, nudging Brent, whispered that this was Mallett's parlor maid, and that things were getting deuced interesting.

XXVIII

THAT the appearance of Louisa Speck in the witness box came as something more than an intense surprise to at any rate two particular persons in that court was evident at once to Brent's watchful eye. Mrs. Mallett, a close observer of what was going on, started as her parlor maid's name was called, and, lifting her eyeglass, surveyed the girl with a wondering stare of prolonged inspection. In the dock, Krevin Crood also let a start of astonishment escape him. He, too, stared at Louisa Speck, and a frown showed itself between his eyebrows, as if he were endeavoring to explain her presence to himself.

Suddenly the frown cleared, and Krevin indulged his fancies with a sharp laugh. Then, turning to Simon, he made some whispered observation. Simon nodded sullenly, as if he comprehended; and from that point forward he kept his small eyes firmly fixed on the witness.

Tansley, too, noticed these things, and bent toward his companion with a meaning glance.

"This young woman knows something," he muttered; "and those two chaps in the dock know what it is!"

The young woman upon whom all eyes were fixed was perhaps the most self-possessed person present. She answered the preliminary questions as coolly as if she had been giving evidence in murder cases as a regular thing. Louisa Speck—twenty-six years of age—been in the employ of Mrs. Mallett, of the Bank House, for three years—still in that employment, as far as she knew. What did she mean by that? Well, that Mrs. Mallett had left the house some days before, and that since yesterday afternoon Mr. Mallett had not been there. Accordingly, neither she nor the other servants knew exactly how things stood.

"Just so," observed Meeking. "Somewhat uncertain, eh? Very well!"

He paused for a moment, glanced at his papers, and suddenly leaned forward toward the witness box with a sharp, direct look at its occupant.

"Now, then!" he said. "When did you first hear of the murder of the late mayor, Mr. Wallingford?"

Louisa Speck's answer came promptly.

"The night it happened."

"What time? And who told you of it?"

"About nine o'clock. Robertshaw, the policeman, told me. I was at the front door, looking out on the Market Square, and he was going past."

"I see! So you remember that evening very well?"

"Quite well."

"Do you remember the previous evening equally well?"

"Yes."

"Were you at the Bank House that evening—the evening before the murder?"

"I was."

"What was going on there that evening? Anything that makes you particularly remember it?"

"Yes."

"What, now?"

"Well, Mrs. Mallett went away that day to visit her sister, Mrs. Coppinger, for a day or two. About noon, Mr. Mallett told me and cook that he wanted to have some gentlemen to dinner that evening, and we were to prepare accordingly."

"I see! Sort of special dinner, eh?"

"Yes."

"Did the gentlemen come?"

"Yes."

"Who were they?"

"Mr. Coppinger and Alderman Crood."

"What time was that?"

"Between six and half past."

"What happened after their arrival?"

"They went into the morning room with Mr. Mallett. I took some brown sherry in there, and glasses. Soon after that, Mr. Mallett went out. I was just inside the dining room as he crossed the hall. He told me there would very likely be another gentleman to dinner, and I must lay another cover. He went out, then, and was away about ten minutes. Then he came back with Mr. Krevin Crood."

"Came back with Mr. Krevin Crood! Did you see them come in together?"

"I let them in."

"Did you hear anything said as they entered?"

"Yes—I heard Mr. Krevin Crood say that he wasn't dressed for dinner parties. Mr. Mallett then told me to take Mr. Krevin upstairs and get him anything he wanted."

"Did you take Mr. Krevin upstairs?"

"Yes—I took him up to Mr. Mallett's dressing room. I showed him the hot water arrangement, got him clean towels, and asked him what he wanted. He said he wanted a clean shirt, a collar, and a handkerchief."

"A handkerchief?"

"Yes—a handkerchief."

"Did you get him these things?"

"I showed him where to get them. I opened the drawers in which Mr. Mallett's shirts, collars, and handkerchiefs are kept, so that he could help himself. Then I asked him if there was anything more I could get him. He said there was nothing but a clothes brush. I got him that, and left him."

"When did you see him next?"

"About twenty minutes after, when he came downstairs and went into the morning room to the other gentlemen."

"Was he smartened up then?"

"He was smart enough—smarter than the others, I should say."

"Had he taken one of Mr. Mallett's shirts?"

"Yes—one of his very best white ones."

"Very good! Now, then, talking about shirts, who looks after the laundry affairs at the Bank House?"

"I do."

"You send the linen to the laundry?"

"Yes."

"And receive it and put it away when it comes back?"

"Yes."

"When does it go, and when does it return?"

"It goes on Monday morning and comes home on Saturday afternoon."

"Do you put the linen away on Saturday afternoon?"

"Not finally. It goes into a hot cupboard, to air. Then on Monday, some time, I sort it out and put it away in the proper place."

"I see! Do you remember sorting it out and putting away the different articles in their proper places on the Monday before this little dinner party?"

"Yes, I do."

"Did you notice the presence of any article which didn't belong to the Mallett family?"

"Yes—at least, I was doubtful."

"Doubtful, eh? Well, what was it?"

"A gentleman's handkerchief."

"You say you weren't sure that it was Mr. Mallett's?"

"I wasn't sure that it wasn't, but I didn't think it was."

"Why were you uncertain?"

"Well, this wasn't like Mr. Mallett's handkerchiefs. He has dozens of them, nearly all fancy ones, with colored borders. This was a very fine cambric handkerchief—I'd never seen one like it before. Still, I wasn't certain that it wasn't Mr. Mallett's, after all."

"Why?"

"Because sometimes, when Mr. Mallett

was away for the day, he'd buy a spare handkerchief. He has a lot of odd handkerchiefs that he's brought home in his pockets. I thought this might have been got that way."

" You didn't mention its presence to anybody?"

" No—I didn't think of it."

" Well, what did you do with the handkerchief about which you were doubtful?"

" I laid it on top of one of several piles of handkerchiefs that were in Mr. Mallett's handkerchief drawer in the dressing room."

" Why did you put it on top?"

" In case any inquiry should be made about it from Marriner's Laundry."

" Was any inquiry made?"

" No."

" Was the drawer you have just spoken of the drawer that you pulled open for Mr. Krevin Crood?"

" Yes."

" Was the handkerchief there then?"

" Yes, it was there."

" You saw it?"

" I saw it."

" Have you ever seen it since?"

" Never."

" Do you know if Mr. Krevin Crood took it out of the drawer?"

" No."

" Did you see it in his possession that evening?"

" No, I didn't; but it wasn't in the drawer next morning."

" You are sure of that?"

" Positive. I went into Mr. Mallett's dressing room very early next morning, and I noticed that Mr. Krevin had left the drawers half open. The handkerchief drawer stuck a little, and I pulled it right out before pushing it in. I noticed then that the handkerchief had gone."

" Did you conclude that Mr. Krevin had taken it?"

" No—I don't think so. I didn't conclude anything. If I thought anything, it would be that Mr. Mallett had taken it. Mr. Mallett would think nothing of taking half a dozen handkerchiefs a day."

" The handkerchief was there when you opened the drawer for Mr. Krevin that evening, and it wasn't there when you looked into the drawer the next morning, early—that so?"

" Yes, that's so."

" Very well! Now, then, about this little dinner. Mr. Mallett had three guests—Mr. Simon Crood, Mr. Krevin Crood, Mr. Coppinger? Nobody else?"

" No—no one else."

" Was it a nice dinner?"

" It was a very good dinner."

" Wine?"

" There were several sorts of wine."

" What time was dinner?"

" About a quarter past seven."

" And what time did the gentlemen rise from table?"

" They didn't rise from table. When dinner was over, Mr. Mallett decanted some very special port that he has in the wine cellar, and they settled down to it around the dinner table, talking."

" I see! Did you hear any of the conversation at the table?"

" No, I didn't. I carried two decanters of the port into the dining room for Mr. Mallett, and got out port glasses from the sideboard. After that I never went into the room again."

" Until what hour did Mr. Mallett's guests remain with him?"

" Well, Alderman Crood and Mr. Krevin Crood left at about a quarter to eleven. They went away together. Mr. Coppinger stopped till about half past eleven."

Meeking paused at this point, put his hand underneath the papers which lay in front of him, and produced a cardboard box. From this, after slowly undoing various wrappings, he took the fragment of stained and charred handkerchief which had been found in the mayor's parlor, and passed it across to the witness.

" Take that in your hand and look at it carefully," he said. " Now, do you recognize that as part of the handkerchief to which I have been referring?"

" It's the same sort of stuff," replied Louisa. " I should say it was part of that handkerchief. It's just like it."

" Same material—an unusual material?"

" I think it is the same handkerchief. It's an unusually broad hem — I noticed that at the time."

" To the best of your belief, is that the handkerchief you've been talking about?"

" Yes," declared Louisa Speck, this time without hesitation. " It is."

Meeking sat down and glanced at Simon Crood's solicitor. Stedman promptly accepted the challenge, and, rising, threw some scornful meaning into his first question to the witness.

"Who got you to tell all this tale?" he asked satirically. "Who got at you?"

Louisa Speck bridled.

"Nobody got at me!" she retorted. "What do you mean by such a question?"

"You don't mean to tell their worships that you haven't been induced to come forward and tell all this?" suggested Stedman incredulously. "Come, now! Who helped you to refresh your memory, and to put all this together?"

"Nobody helped me," replied Louisa Speck, with rising indignation. "Do you think I'm not capable of doing things on my own? I can use my eyes and ears as well as you can, and perhaps better!"

"Answer my question," said Stedman, as a laugh rose against him. "Who got you to go to the police?"

"Nobody got me to go to the police. I went to the police on my own account. I read the newspaper about what took place at the inquest—the last inquest, I mean—and as soon as I heard about the handkerchief, I knew very well that that was the one I'd noticed in our laundry, and so I went to see Mr. Hawthwaite. Mr. Hawthwaite has known what I had to tell you for a good while now."

Stedman was taken aback; but he put a definite question.

"On your oath, did you see that handkerchief in Mr. Krevin Crood's possession the night that he was at Mr. Mallett's?" he asked.

"I've already told him I never did," retorted Louisa Speck, pointing at Meeking. "I didn't see him with it; but I'm very certain he got it."

Stedman waved the witness away, and Meeking proceeded to put in the depositions taken before the coroner in regard to the finding of the fragment of handkerchief and its ownership. He called evidence to show that the piece just produced was that which had been picked up from the hearth in the mayor's parlor on the evening of the murder, soon after the finding of the dead man, and to prove that it had remained in the custody of the police ever since. The fragment went the round of the bench of magistrates, and Tansley whispered to Brent that if Meeking could prove that Krevin Crood had taken that handkerchief out of a drawer in Mallett's dressing room, and had thrown it away on the following evening in the mayor's parlor, Krevin's neck was in danger.

"But there's a link missing yet," he murmured. "How did Krevin get at Wallingford? They've got to prove that! However, Meeking's evidently well primed, and knows what he's after. What's coming next?"

What came next was the glancing of the barrister's eye toward a venerable, gray-bearded man who sat in the front row of spectators, leaning on a gold-headed cane. He rose as Meeking looked at him, and came slowly forward—a curious figure in those somber surroundings.

XXIX

From a certain amount of whispering and nodding that went on around him, Brent gathered that this ancient gentleman was not unknown to many of those present. Tansley was turning to him, ready, as always, with information.

"That's old Dr. Septimus Pellery," he whispered. "Tremendous big pot on antiquarianism, archæology, and that sort of stuff. Used to live here in Hathelsborough, years ago, when I was a youngster. I should have thought he was dead, long since. Wonder where they unearthed him, and what he's here for? No end of a swell in his own line, anyhow."

Meeking seemed determined to impress on the court the character and extent of Dr. Pellery's qualifications as an expert in archæological matters. Addressing him in an almost reverential manner, he proceeded to enumerate the witness's distinctions.

"Dr. Pellery, you are, I believe, a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries?"

"I have that honor."

"And a member of more than one archæological society?"

"I am."

"And a corresponding member of various foreign societies of a similar sort?"

"For many years."

"You are also, I think, a D. C. L. of the university of Oxford?"

"Yes."

"And the author of many books and articles on your pet subject—archæology?"

"That is so."

"Am I right, Dr. Pellery, in believing that you are thoroughly well acquainted with the archæology, antiquities, and ancient architecture of this town?"

"Quite right. I lived here for several years—ten or eleven years."

"That was—when?"

"It is about twenty years since I left this place."

"You made a close study of it while you were resident here?"

"A very close study. Hathelsborough, from my point of view, is one of the most interesting towns in England. While I lived here, I accumulated a mass of notes respecting its history and antiquities, with the idea of writing a monograph on the borough; but I have never made use of the material."

"Let us hope that you will still do so, Dr. Pellery," said Meeking, with a suave smile and a polite bow.

But Dr. Pellery shook his head and stroked his long beard. A cynical smile played around his wrinkled eyes.

"No—I don't think I ever shall," he said. "Indeed, I'm sure I shan't."

"May I ask why?"

"You may. The reason is that there aren't twenty people in Hathelsborough who would buy such a book. Hathelsborough people don't care twopence about the history of their old town. All they care about is money. This case is a proof!"

"I think we'll get back to the case," said Meeking, amid a ripple of laughter. "Well, we may consider you as the greatest living expert on Hathelsborough, Dr. Pellery, and eminently fitted to give us some very important evidence. Do you know the ancient church of St. Laurence, at the back of this Moot Hall?"

"Aye, as well as I know my own face in the glass," answered Dr. Pellery, with a short laugh. "I know practically every stone of it."

"It is, I believe, a very old church?"

"It is the oldest church, not only in Hathelsborough, which is saying a good deal, but in all this part of the county," replied the witness with emphasis. "St. Hathelswide, the parish church, is old, but St. Laurence antedates it by at least five hundred years. The greater part of St. Laurence, as it now stands, was complete in the eighth century. St. Hathelswide was built in the thirteenth."

Meeking produced a large chart, evidently made for the occasion, and had it set up on the table, in full view of the bench and the witness box.

"From this plan, Dr. Pellery, it appears that the west tower, a square tower, of St. Laurence immediately faces the back of the Moot Hall. Between the outer wall of the tower and the outer wall of the Moot Hall there is a sort of connecting wall—"

"Not a sort of," interrupted Dr. Pellery. "It is a connecting wall, thirty-six feet long, ten feet high, and eight feet in width, forming an arch over the street beneath—the narrow street called St. Laurence Lane."

"It is an uncommon feature, that wall?" suggested Meeking.

"Comparatively, yes. I know of other places where ancient buildings are so joined. But there are few examples."

"Well, I want to ask you a very important question about that connecting wall. Is there a secret way through that wall from St. Laurence's tower to the Moot Hall?"

Dr. Pellery drew himself up, stroked his beard, and glanced around the court. Then he gave Meeking an emphatic nod.

"There is. I discovered it myself, years ago. I have always thought that I was the only living person who knew of it."

Meeking let this answer soak in to the mentality of his hearers. Then he said quietly:

"Will you tell us all about your discovery, Dr. Pellery?"

"Enough for your purpose," replied the witness. "You have there, I believe, a sectional drawing of the tower. Give it to me. Now," he continued, holding up a sheet of stout paper, and illustrating his remarks with the tip of his forefinger, "I will show you what I mean. The tower of St. Laurence is eighty feet in height. It is divided into three sections. The lower section, the most considerable of the three, forms a western porch to the church itself, which is entered from it by a Norman arch. Above this is the middle section; above that the upper section, wherein are three ancient bells. The middle and upper sections are reached from the lower by a newel stair, set in the southwest angle of the tower. The middle section has for many centuries been a beamed and paneled chamber, from which the bells are rung, and wherein are stored a good many old things belonging to the church—chiefly in ancient chests. During the years that I lived in Hathelsborough I spent a great deal of time in this chamber. Mr. Goodbody, then vicar of St. Laurence, allowed me to examine anything I found stored there. It was among the muniments and registers of St. Laurence, indeed, that I found a great deal of valuable information about the history of the town. Well, I have just said that this chamber, this middle section of the tower, is paneled. It is paneled from the oak flooring to within two feet of the oak beams in its ceiling, and the paneling, though it is probably four hundred years old, is still in an excellent state of preservation.

"Now, about the middle of the last year that I spent in this town, I began to be puzzled about the connecting wall between the tower of St. Laurence and the Moot Hall. I saw no reason for building an arch at that point. Certainly it had not been built as a support, for the masonry of the tower and of the hall is unusually solid. I got the idea that that wall had originally been built as a means of communication between tower and hall; that it was hollow, and that at each extremity there was a secret means of entrance and exit. I knew from experience that this sort of thing was common in Hathelsborough. The older part of the town is a veritable rabbit warren. There is scarcely a house in the Market Place, for instance, in which there is not a double staircase, the inner one being very cleverly concealed. I know of several secret ways and passages, entered on one side of a street, and terminating far off on another. There is an underground way beneath the Market Place, which is entered at the barbican in the castle, and which terminates in St. Faith's Chapel in St. Hathelswide's Church. There is another, also underground, from St. Matthias's Hospital to the God's House in Cripple Lane. As I say, the old town is honeycombed; so there would be, of course, nothing unusual or remarkable in the presence of a secret passage between the tower of St. Laurence and the Moot Hall. The only thing was that there was no record of any such passage through the connecting wall. No one had ever heard of it, and there were no signs of entrance to it either in the tower or in the Moot Hall. However, I discovered it, by careful and patient investigation of the paneling in the chamber I have mentioned. The paneling is divided, on each wall of the chamber, into seven compartments. The fourth compartment on the outer wall slides back, and gives access to a passage cut through the arch across St. Laurence Lane and so to the Moot Hall."

"There's one man here who knows all this!" whispered Tansley in Brent's ear. "Look at Krevin Crood!"

Krevin was smiling. There was something unusually cynical in his smile, but to Brent it conveyed more than cynical amusement. There was in it the suggestion of assurance. Krevin, decided Brent, had something up his sleeve.

But the other people present were still intent on the old antiquary. Having finished his explanation, he looked at the chart that Meeking had placed before him, and seemed satisfied with what he had said. Meeking, however, wanted more.

"To the Moot Hall!" he repeated. "Well, Dr. Pellery, and where does this passage emerge in the Moot Hall?"

"Just so," said Dr. Pellery. "That, of course, is important. Well, the wall or arch between the tower of St. Laurence and the Moot Hall, on reaching the outer wall of the latter, is continued from that outer wall along the right-hand side of the corridor off which the extremely ancient chamber known as the mayor's parlor is situated. If close examination is made of that wall, you will find that it is eight feet thick; but it is not a solid wall. The secret passage I have mentioned runs through it, to a point halfway along the length of the mayor's parlor; and access to the mayor's parlor is had by a secret door in the paneling of that chamber—just as in the case of the chamber in the church tower."

"You investigated all this yourself, Dr. Pellery?"

"Discovered and investigated it."

"And kept the secret to yourself?"

"I did. I saw no reason for communicating it to any one."

"However, as you discovered it, it was not impossible that others should make the same discovery?"

"It is very evident that somebody has discovered it!" replied the witness, with emphasis.

"Now, you say that it is about twenty years since you made this discovery. Have you been in the tower of St. Laurence since?"

"Yes. Superintendent Hawthwaite has been in communication with me—privately—about this matter for some little time. I came to Hathelsborough yesterday, and in the afternoon he and I visited the tower, and I showed him the secret way and the doors in the paneling. We passed from the tower into the mayor's parlor—as you or any one may, just now, if you know the secret of the sliding panels."

"Is it what you would call a difficult secret?"

"Not a bit of it, once you have hit on the exact spot at which to exert a pressure. The panels are then moved back quite easily."

"Your evidence, then, Dr. Pellery, comes to this—there is a secret passage through the apparently solid arch in St. Laurence Lane, which leads direct from the middle chamber in the tower of St. Laurence to the mayor's parlor in the Moot Hall. Is that correct?"

Dr. Pellery made an old-fashioned bow.

"That is absolutely correct."

"I am sure the court is greatly obliged to you, sir," said Meeking, responding to the old man's courtesy.

He looked around, and, seeing that Stedman made no sign, glanced at the policeman who stood by the witness box.

"Call Stephen Spizey!" he commanded.

Spizey moved ponderously into the box, in all the glory of his time-honored livery. He looked very big, and very consequential, and unusually glum. Meeking, who was not a Hathelsborough man, glanced quizzingly at Spizey's grandeur and at the cocked hat which the town crier placed on the ledge before him.

"Er—you're some sort of a corporation official, aren't you, Spizey?" he suggested.

"Apparitor to his worshipful the mayor of Hathelsborough," responded Spizey, in his richest tones. "Mace bearer to his worship, town crier, bellman, steward of the pound, steward of High Cross and Low Cross, summoner of Thursday Market, convener of Saturday Market, receiver of dues and customs—"

"You appear to be a good deal of a pluralist!" interrupted Meeking. "Are you caretaker of St. Laurence's church?"

"I am."

"Do you live in a cottage at the corner of St. Laurence's churchyard?"

"I do."

"Do you remember the evening on which Mr. Wallingford was murdered?"

"Yes."

"At seven o'clock of that evening were you in your cottage?"

"I was."

"Did Mr. Krevin Crood come to your cottage door about seven o'clock, and ask you for the keys of St. Laurence?"

"He did."

"Did he say why he wanted to go into the church?"

"Yes—to write out a hinscription for a London gent as wanted it."

"Did you give him the keys?"

"I did."

"Did you see him go into the church?"

"Yes, and I heard him lock himself inside it."

"Did he eventually bring the keys back?"

"Not to me—to my missis."

Meeking waved Spizey's magnificence aside, and called for Mrs. Spizey. Mrs. Spizey, too, readily remembered the evening under discussion, and said so, with a sniff which seemed to indicate decided disapproval of her memories respecting it.

"What were you doing that evening, Mrs. Spizey?" asked Meeking.

"Which for the most part of it, sir, I was a washing of that very floor as you're a standing on, sir, me being cleaner to the Moot Hall. That 'ud be from six to eight."

"Then you went home, I suppose?"

"I did, sir, and very thankful to!"

"Was your husband at home?"

"He were not, sir. Which Spizey had gone out to have his glass, sir, as is his custom."

"Did Mr. Krevin Crood come to you with the keys of the church?"

"He did, sir. Which the clock had just struck eight. And remarked, sir, that the light was failing, and that his eyes wasn't as strong as they had been. Pleasant like, sir."

"I see! Had Mr. Krevin Crood any papers in his hand?"

"He had papers in his hand, sir, or under his arm."

"And that was just after eight o'clock?"

"The clocks had just struck it, sir."

Meeking nodded his dismissal of Mrs. Spizey. It was plain that he was getting near the end of his case, and his manner became sharp and almost abrupt.

"Call Detective Sergeant Welton," he said. "Welton, were you present when Superintendent Hawthwaite arrested the prisoner Krevin Crood, and afterward when the other prisoner, Simon Crood, was taken into custody?"

"I was, sir."

"Did you afterward, on Superintendent Hawthwaite's instructions, search Krevin

Crood's lodgings and Simon Crood's house?"

"I did, sir."

"Tell their worships what you found."

"I first made a search at the rooms occupied by Krevin Crood, in Little Bailey Gate. I there found, in an old writing case kept in his bedroom, a quantity of papers and documents in the handwriting of the late mayor, Mr. Wallingford. I handed these over to Superintendent Hawthwaite. I now produce them. There are fifty-six separate papers in all. I have gone through them carefully. All relate to the financial affairs of the borough. Several are stained with blood."

There was a shiver of horror among the women present as the witness handed over a sheaf of various-sized papers, indicating where the stains lay. But the even-toned, matter-of-fact, coldly official voice went on.

"Later, I made a search of the prisoner Simon Crood's house at the Tannery. In a desk, in a room which he uses as a private office, I discovered more papers and documents similar to those that I had found at Krevin Crood's lodgings. I produce these. There are seventeen separate papers. All are in the handwriting of the late Mr. Wallingford. I also found, in a drawer in Simon Crood's bedroom, a memorandum book, bound in red leather, the greater part of which is filled with notes and figures made by the late mayor. I produce this, too. I also identify it as a book which the late mayor was in the habit of carrying about with him. I have frequently seen him make use of it."

While every neck was craned forward to catch a glimpse of the memorandum book, Tansley suddenly saw Krevin Crood making signals to him from the dock. He drew Brent's attention to the fact, and then went down into the well of the court and over to Krevin.

Brent watched them curiously. It seemed to him that Krevin was asking Tansley's advice, and that Tansley was dissuading Krevin from adopting some particular course. They conversed for some minutes, while the magistrates were examining the memorandum book and the papers. Simon Crood joined in, and seemed to agree with Tansley; but suddenly Krevin turned away from both with a decisive gesture, and advanced to the front of the dock.

"Your worships!" he exclaimed in a loud, compelling tone. "I have had quite enough of this farce! I desire to make a full and important statement!"

XXX

Despite the admonitions of the presiding magistrate, and the stern voices of sundry officials posted here and there about the court, a hubbub of excited comment and murmur broke out on Krevin Crood's dramatic announcement. Nor was the excitement confined to the public benches and galleries. Around the solicitors' table there ensued a putting together of heads and an exchange of whisperings. Even on the bench itself, crowded to its full extent, some of the magistrates so far forgot their judicial position as to bend toward one another with muttered words and knowing looks.

Suddenly, from somewhere in the background, a strident voice made its tones heard above the commotion:

"He knows! Let him tell what he knows! Let's hear all about it!"

"Silence!" commanded the chairman. "If this goes on, I shall have the court cleared. Any further interruption—" He interrupted himself, glancing dubiously at Krevin. "I think you would be well advised to—"

"I want no advice!" retorted Krevin. Simon had been at his elbow, anxious and pleading, for the last minute. He, it was very evident, was sorely concerned by Krevin's determination to speak. "I claim my right to have my say, and I shall have it. This has gone on long enough, and I don't propose to have it go on any longer. I had nothing to do with the murder of Wallingford, but I know who had, and I'm not going to keep the knowledge to myself, now that things have come to this pass. You'd better listen to a plain and straightforward tale, instead of to bits of a story here and bits of a story there!"

The chairman turned to those of his brother magistrates who were sitting nearest to him on the bench. After a whispered consultation with them and with the clerk, he nodded, not overgraciously, at the defiant figure in the dock.

"We will hear your statement," he said. "You had better go into the witness box and make it on oath."

Krevin moved across to the witness box with alacrity, and went through the usual formalities as only a practiced hand could.

He smiled cynically as he folded his fingers together on the ledge of the box and faced the excited listeners.

"As there's no one to ask me any questions — at this stage, anyhow — I'd better tell my story in my own fashion," he said. "To save time and needless explanations, let me begin by saying that as far as it went, all the evidence your worships have heard, from the police, from Louisa Speck, from Dr. Pellery, from Spizey and his wife, from everybody, I think, is substantially correct—entirely correct, I might say, for I don't remember anything that I could contradict. The whole point is—what does it lead up to? In the opinion of the police, to identifying me with the actual murder of John Wallingford, and my brother there with being accessory to the crime. The police, as usual, are absolutely and entirely at fault. I did not kill Wallingford, and accordingly my brother could not be an accessory to what I did not do and never had the remotest intention of doing. Now you shall hear how circumstantial evidence, brought to a certain point, is of no value whatever if it can't be carried past that point. Hawthwaite has got his evidence to a certain point, and now he's up against a blank wall. He doesn't know what lies behind that blank wall. I do, and I'm the only person in this world who does.

"Now listen to a plain, truthful, unvarnished account of the real facts. On the evening of the day before Wallingford's murder, between half past six and seven o'clock, I was in the big saloon at Bull's Snug. Mallett came in, evidently in search of somebody. It turned out that I was the person he was looking for. He told me that his wife was away, and that he was giving a little dinner party to my brother Simon and to Coppinger. They were already at his house, and he and they were anxious that I should join them. Now I knew quite enough of my brother Simon, and of Coppinger, and of Mallett himself, to know that if they wanted my company it was with some ulterior motive; and, being a straightforward man, I said so there and then. Mallett admitted it. They had, he said, a matter of business to propose to me. I had no objection, and I went with him. What the girl Louisa Speck has told you about what happened after I entered the Bank House is quite correct. She took me up into Mallett's dressing room, showed me where I could get what I wanted, and left me to make my toilet. I helped myself to clean linen, and I have no doubt whatever that the handkerchief which I took from one of the drawers that the girl opened for me was the handkerchief of Dr. Wellesley's of which we have heard so much in this case.

"Having made my toilet, I went downstairs and joined my host and his other guests. We had a glass or two of Mallett's excellent sherry, and in due course we dined—dined very well indeed. When dinner was over, Mallett got up some of his old port, and we settled down to our business talk. I very quickly discovered why I had been brought into it. What we may call the war between Wallingford, as leader of the reform party, and the town trustees, as representatives of the old system, had come to a definite stage, and Mallett, Coppinger, and my brother Simon realized that it was high time to open negotiations with the enemy. They wanted, in short, to come to terms, and they were anxious that I, as a lawyer, as a man thoroughly acquainted with the affairs of the borough, and as a former official of high standing, should act as intermediary, or ambassador, or go-between, whatever you like to call it, in the matter at issue between them and Wallingford. Of course, I was willing.

"Mallett acted as chief spokesman in putting matters plainly before me. He said that Wallingford, since his election as mayor of Hathelsborough, had found out a lot—a great deal more than they wished him to know. He had accumulated facts, figures, statistics; he had contrived to possess himself of a vast amount of information, and he was steadily and persistently accumulating more. There was no doubt whatever, said Mallett, as to what were the intentions of Wallingford and his party—though up to then Wallingford's party did not know all that Wallingford knew. There was to be a clean sweep of everything that existed under the town trustee system. The town trustees themselves were to go. All pensions were to be done away with. All secret payments and transactions were to be unearthed and prohibited for the future. The entire financial business of the town was to be placed in the care of the elected officials. In short, everything was to be turned upside down, and the good old days were to cease. That was what was to happen if Wallingford went triumphantly on his way.

"But it was the belief of Mallett, and of Coppinger, and of my brother Simon, that Wallingford's way could be barred. How? Well, all three believed that Wallingford could be bought off. They believed that Wallingford had his price; that he could be got at; that he could be squared. All three of them are men who believe that every man has his price. I believe that myself, and I'm not ashamed of voicing my belief. Every man can be bought, if you can only agree on a price with him. Now, the town trustees knew that Wallingford had ambitions. They knew what some of his ambitions were, and of one in particular. They proposed to buy him in that way, and they commissioned me to see him privately, and to offer him certain terms.

"The terms were these—if Wallingford would drop his investigations, and remain quiet for the remaining period of his mayoralty, the town trustees would agree to the making and carrying out of certain minor reforms, which should be engineered by and credited to Wallingford, in order to save his face with his party. Moreover, they would guarantee to Wallingford a big increase in his practice as a solicitor, and they would promise him their united support when a vacancy arose in the Parliamentary representation of Hathelsborough—which vacancy, they knew, would occur within the year, as the sitting member had intimated his intention of resigning. This last was the big card I was to play. We all knew that Wallingford was extremely desirous of Parliamentary honors, and that he was very well aware that with the town trustees on his side he would win handsomely, whoever was brought against him. I was to play that card for all it was worth. Not a man of us doubted that Wallingford would be tempted by the bait, and would swallow it."

Brent leaped to his feet and flung a scornful exclamation across the court.

"Then not a man of you knew him!" he cried. "He would have flung your bribe back into the dirty hands that offered it to him!"

Krevin Crood smiled more cynically than ever.

"That's all you know, young man," he retorted. "You'll know more when you're my age. Well," he continued, turning his back on Brent and again facing the bench, "that was the situation. I was to act as ambassador, and, if I succeeded in my embassy, I was to be well paid for my labor."

"By the town trustees?" inquired the chairman.

"By the town trustees, certainly," replied Krevin. "Who else would pay me? As my principals—"

"I think you will have to tell us what fee, or payment, you were to have," interrupted the chairman. "If—"

"Oh, as the whole thing has come to nothing, I don't mind telling that," said Krevin. "I shall never get it now, so why not talk of it? I was to have a thousand pounds."

"As a reward for inducing the mayor to withhold from the public certain information which he had acquired as regards the unsatisfactory condition of the borough finances?" asked the chairman.

"Ye-es, if you put it that way," assented Krevin. "You might put it another way, as regards the mayor. He was just to let things slide."

"Go on, if you please," said the chairman dryly. "We understand."

"Well," continued Krevin cheerfully, "we settled my mission over Mallett's port. The next thing was for me to carry it out. It was necessary to do this immediately, for we knew that Wallingford had carried his investigations to such an advanced stage that he might make their results public at any moment. Now, I did not want any one to know of my meeting with him. I wanted it to be absolutely secret, and I knew how to bring that about. Wallingford spent nearly every evening alone in the mayor's parlor. I knew how to reach the mayor's parlor unobserved. The secret of which Dr. Pellery has just told you was also known to me, for I discovered the passage between the tower of St. Laurence and the Moot Hall many years ago; and I determined to get at Wallingford by way of that passage.

"About seven o'clock of the evening on which Wallingford was murdered, I called at Spizey's cottage in St. Laurence's churchyard, and got the keys of the church from him, on the excuse that I wanted to copy an inscription. I locked myself into the church and went up to the chamber in the tower. I spent some little time there, considering the details of my plan of campaign, before going along the secret passage. It would be about half past seven, perhaps a little later, when at last I slipped open the panel and crossed over to the Moot Hall. The panel at the other end of the passage, which admits to the mayor's parlor, is the fifth one on the left-hand side of that room. I undid it very cautiously and silently. There was then no one in the parlor. All was silent. I looked through the crack of the panel. There was no one in the place at all. Incidentally, I may mention that when I thus took an observation of the parlor, I noticed that on an old oak chest, standing by the wainscoting, and immediately behind the mayor's chair and desk, lay the rapier which was produced at the inquest, and with which, undoubtedly, he was killed.

"Suddenly the handle of the door into the corridor was turned, and I heard Wallingford's voice. I slipped the panel back till it was nearly closed, and stood with my ear against it, listening. Wallingford was not alone. He had a woman with him. From their first exchange of words I made out that he had met her in the corridor just outside the door of the mayor's parlor, and that they were quarreling, and both in high temper. I—"

"Stop!" exclaimed the chairman, lifting his hand, as an excited murmur began to run round the court. "Silence! If there is any interruption—" He turned to Krevin. "You say that you heard Mr. Wallingford come into the mayor's parlor, and that he was accompanied by a woman, with whom he was having high words. Did you see this woman?"

"No—I saw neither her nor Wallingford. I only heard their voices."

"Did you recognize her voice as that of any woman you knew?"

"I did, unmistakably. I knew quite well who she was."

"Who was she, then?"

Krevin shook his head.

"For the moment, wait!" he replied. "Let me tell my tale in my own way. To resume, I say that they—she and Wallingford — were having high words. I could tell, for instance, that he was in a temper which I should call furious. I overheard all that was said. As they entered the room, he asked how she had got there. She replied that she had watched Mrs. Bunning out of her house, from among the bushes in St. Laurence's churchyard, and had then slipped in at Bunning's back door, being absolutely determined to see him, Wallingford. He answered that she would get no good by waylaying him; he had found her out and was done with her; she was an impostor, an adventuress; she had come to the end of her tether. She then demanded some letters—her letters. There were excited words about this from each, and it was not easy to catch all that was said. At times they were both speaking together; but she got in a clear demand at last—was he or was he not going to hand those letters over? He said no, he was not. They were going to remain in his possession as a hold over her. She was a danger to the community, with her plottings and underhand ways, and he intended to show certain of those letters to others. There was more excited wrangling over this. I heard Dr. Wellesley's name mentioned, then Mallett's. I also heard some reference, of which I couldn't make head or tail, to money and documents. In the midst of all this Wallingford suddenly told her to go. He had had enough of it, he said, and had his work to attend to. Once more she demanded the letters, and he answered with a very peremptory negative. I heard a sound as of his chair being pulled up to his desk, followed by a brief silence. Then, all of a sudden, I heard another sound, half cry, half groan, and a sort of dull thud, as if something had fallen. A moment later, as I was wondering what had happened, and what to do, I heard the door which opens into the corridor close very gently. At that I pushed back the panel and looked into the mayor's parlor."

It seemed to Brent that every soul in the place, from the gray-haired chairman on the bench to the stolid-faced official by the witness box, was holding his breath, and that every eye was fastened on Krevin Crood with an irresistible fascination. There was a terrible silence in the court as Krevin paused, terminated by an involuntary sigh of relief as he made signs of speaking again.

In that instant, Brent saw Mrs. Elstrick, the tall, gaunt woman of whom he had heard at least one mysterious piece of news from Hawthwaite, quietly slip out of her place near the outer door and vanish. He saw, too, that no one but himself saw her go, so absorbed were all others in what was coming.

"When I saw—what I did see," continued Krevin, in a low, concentrated tone, "I went in. The mayor was lying across his desk, still, quiet. I touched his shoulder, and got blood on my fingers. I knew then what had happened—the woman had snatched up the rapier and run him through. I pulled out my handkerchief—the handkerchief I had taken from Mallett's drawer—wiped my hand, and threw the handkerchief in the fire. Then I took up a mass of papers and a memorandum book which Wallingford had laid down, and went away by the passage. That is the plain truth. I should never have told it if I hadn't been arrested. I care nothing at all that Wallingford was killed by this woman—not I! I shouldn't have cared if she had gone scot-free; but if it's going to be my neck or hers, well, I prefer it to be hers. And there you are!"

"Once again," said the chairman, "who was this woman?"

Krevin Crood might have been answering the most casual of casual questions.

"Who was she?" he replied. "Why, Mrs. Saumarez!"

XXXI

BRENT was out of his seat near the door, out of the court itself, out of the Moot Hall, and in the Market Place before he realized what he was doing. It was a brilliant summer day, and just then the town clocks were striking the noontide. He stood for a second staring about him, as if blinded and dazed by the strong sunlight; but it was not the sunlight that confused him, though he stood there blinking under it.

Presently his brain cleared, and he turned and ran swiftly down Rivergate, the narrow street that led to the low-lying outer edge of the town. Rivergate was always quiet; just then it was deserted. As Brent got halfway down it, he saw at its foot a motor car, drawn up by the curb, and evidently waiting for somebody. The somebody was Mrs. Elstrick, who was hastening toward the car. In another second she had sprung in, and the machine had sped away in the direction of the open country.

Brent let it go, without another glance in its direction.

He turned at the foot of Rivergate into Farthing Lane, the long, winding, tree-bordered alley that ran along the edge of the town past the outer fringe of houses—the alley wherein Hawthwaite had witnessed the nocturnal meeting between Mrs. Elstrick and Krevin Crood. Brent remembered that as he hastened along, running between the trees on one side and the high walls of the gardens on the other; but he gave no further thought to the recollection. His brain was not yet fully recovered from the shock of Krevin Crood's last words, and it was obsessed by a single idea—that of gaining the garden entrance of the Abbey House and confronting the woman whom Krevin had formally denounced as the murderer of Wallingford.

As he hurried along, he found himself saying certain words over and over again, and still again:

"I'm not going to see a woman hang! I'm not going to see a woman hang! I'm—not—going—to—"

Behind this suddenly aroused quixotic sentiment, he was sick with horror. He knew that what Krevin Crood had told at last was true. He knew, too, that it would never have come out if Krevin himself had not been in danger. A feeling of almost physical nausea came over him as he remembered the callous, brutal cynicism of Krevin's last words:

"If it's going to be my neck or hers, I prefer it to be hers!"

A woman—yet a murderess—the murderess of his cousin, whose death he had vowed to avenge. Of course it was so. Brent saw many things now. The anxiety to get the letters—the dread of publicity expressed to Peppermore—the mystery spread over many things and actions—now this affair with Mallett—there was no reason to doubt Krevin Crood's accusation. The fragments of the puzzle had been pieced together.

As he ran along the lane, and as his mental faculties regained their normality, Brent himself did some piecing together. Every word of Krevin Crood's statement had bitten itself into his intelligence. Now he could reconstruct. He visualized the mayor's parlor on that fateful evening. An angry, disillusioned, nerve-racked man, sore and restive under the fancy—or, rather, the realization — of deceit, saying bitter and contemptuous words; a desperate, defeated woman, cornered like a rat; and close to her hand the rapier, lying on the old chest where its purchaser had carelessly flung it. A maddened thing, man or woman, would snatch that up, and—

"Blind, uncontrollable impulse!" muttered Brent. "She struck *at* him, *at* him—and then it was all over. Intentional, no! Yet—the law! But, by God, I won't have a hand in hanging a woman! Time?"

He knew the exact location of the door in the garden wall of the Abbey House, and presently he ran up to it, panting from his swift dash along the lane. Not five minutes had elapsed since his slip out of the excited court; but every second of the coming minutes was precious.

The door was locked. The garden wall was eight feet high, and so built that on all the expanse of its smoothed surface there was no foothold, no projection for fingers to cling to; but Brent was in that frame of mind which makes light of obstacles. He drew back into the lane, ran, gathered himself for an upward spring at the coping of the wall, leaped, grasped it, struggled, drew up his weight with a mighty effort, threw a leg over, and dropped, gasping and panting, into the shaded garden.

It was quiet there—peaceful as a glade set deep in the heart of a silent wood. Brent lay for a few seconds where he had dropped. Then, with a great effort to get his breath, he rose and went quickly up the laureled walks toward the house. A moment more, and he was abreast of the kitchen and its open door, and in the presence of print-gowned, white-aproned women who first exclaimed and then stared at the sudden sight of him.

"Mrs. Saumarez?" said Brent, frightened at the sound of his own voice. "In?"

The cook, a fat, comfortable woman, turned on him from a clear fire.

"The mistress has not come in yet, sir," she said. "She went out very early this morning on her bicycle, and we haven't seen her since. I expect she'll be back for lunch."

Brent glanced at the open window of the room in which he had first encountered Mrs. Saumarez, and to which he had brought the casket and its contents.

"Can I go in there and sit down?" he asked. "I want to see Mrs. Saumarez."

"Certainly, sir," answered the cook and the parlor maid in chorus. "She can't be long, surely."

Brent went farther along and stepped into the room. Not long? He knew very well that that room would never see its late occupant again. She was gone, of course.

The room looked much the same as when he had last seen it, except that now there were great masses of summer flowers on all sides. He glanced around, and his observant eye was quick to notice one detail. Beneath the writing table a big wastebasket was filled to its edges with torn papers.

He moved nearer, speculating on what it was that had been destroyed. Suddenly, behind the basket, he noticed, flung away, crumpled, on the floor, the buff envelope of a telegram.

Picking this up, he expected to find it empty, but the message was inside. He drew out and smoothed the flimsy sheet, and read its contents. They were comprised in four words:

Lingmore Crossroads—six thirty.

Of course, that was from Mallett. Brent glanced at the postmarks. The telegram had been sent from Clothford at seven o'clock the previous evening, and received at Hathelsborough before eight. It was an appointment, without doubt.

Brent knew Lingmore Crossroads. He had been there on a pleasure jaunt with Queenie. It was a point on a main road whence you could go north or south, east or west, with great facility. Doubtless Mrs. Saumarez, arriving there early in the morning, would find Mallett and a swift automobile awaiting her. Well—

A sudden ringing at the front doorbell, a sudden loud knocking on the same door, made Brent crush envelope and telegram in his hand and thrust the crumpled ball of paper into his pocket. A second later he heard voices at the door—heavy steps in the hall—Hawthwaite's voice.

"No," said the parlor maid, evidently answering some question; "but Mr. Brent's in the study. The mistress—"

Hawthwaite, with one of his plain-clothes men, came striding in, saw Brent, and closed the door, shutting out the parlor maid.

"Gone?" he asked sharply.

"Out for a bicycle ride, they say," answered Brent, purposely affecting unconcern. "Went out early this morning, I understand."

"What did you come here for?" demanded Hawthwaite.

"To ask her, personally, if what Krevin Crood said is true," replied Brent.

Hawthwaite laughed.

"Do you think she'd have admitted it, Mr. Brent?" he said. "I don't!"

"I think she would," answered Brent. "But—"

"Well?" inquired Hawthwaite.

"I don't suppose I shall ever have the

chance of putting such a question to her," added Brent. "She's—off!"

Hawthwaite looked round.

"Um!" he remarked. "Well, it only means another hue and cry. She and Mallett, of course! There's one thing in our favor—she doesn't know that Krevin Crood knew anything about it."

"Are you sure of that?" suggested Brent.

"Quite sure enough," affirmed Hawthwaite. "She hasn't an idea that anybody knows. So—we shall get her!"

"What about Krevin Crood, and Simon?" asked Brent.

"Adjourned," said the superintendent. "There's no doubt Krevin has told the true story at last; but he and Simon are still in custody, and probably will be until to-morrow. We want to know a bit more yet; but I'll tell you what, Mr. Brent—this morning's work has broken up the old system. The town trustees and the ancient régime, as they call it—gone! Smashed, Mr. Brent!"

"What are you going to do—about this?" interrupted Brent, glancing around the room.

"Set the wires to work," answered Hawthwaite carelessly. "Unless she and Mallett have laid their plans with extraordinary cleverness, they can't get out of the country. A noticeable pair, too! Went out very early this morning, cycling, did she? I must have a talk with the servants. And that companion, now—Mrs. Elstrick—where's she got to? I noticed her in court."

"Left, sir, just before Krevin Crood finished," said Hawthwaite's companion. "I saw her slip out."

"Aye, well!" observed Hawthwaite. "I don't know that that matters. If any of them can get through the meshes of our net—Mr. Brent!"

"Well?" asked Brent.

"We've got at the truth at last—about your cousin," continued Hawthwaite, with a significant look. "It's been a case of one thing leading to another, and two things running side by side. If we hadn't cornered Krevin Crood, we'd never have had his revelations about the town trustees. Talk about your Local Government Board inquiry—why, five minutes of Krevin's tongue work did more than half a dozen inquiries! I tell you, sir, the old system's dead. The Crood gang was smashed to pieces in that court this morning. Somehow, it's that that interests me most, Mr. Brent. But — business!" He turned to the plain-clothes man, and nodded toward the door. "Fetch those servants in here," he said. "They've got to know."

Brent went away then, carrying certain secrets with him. He put them away in a mental vault and sealed them down. Let Hawthwaite do his own work—he would give the police no help.

He foresaw his own future work. Wallingford, dead though he was, had won his victory, and in his death had slain the old wicked system. Now there was building and reconstruction to be done, and it was Brent's job to do it.

He saw far ahead as he trod the sunlit streets of the old town. He would marry Queenie, and they would settle into the slow-moving life of Hathelsborough. He and men who thought with him would slowly build up a new healthy state of things on the ruins of the old.

So thinking, he turned mechanically toward Mrs. Appleyard's house, in search of Queenie.

Queenie, said Mrs. Appleyard, was in the garden behind the house. Brent went through the hall, and out into the garden's shade. There he found Queenie. She sat in a summerhouse, and she was shelling peas for dinner.

THE END

BEAUTY ABIDES

Beauty abides in every street;
  Each window sends a glimpse of her,
To make the sour of living sweet
  And serve occasion's minister.

Yet commonplace the stars appear,
  And usual the seas, and skies;
But if the dawn came once a year,
  We'd crowd the roofs to watch it rise!

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4th—Begin now—this week—to lay aside the first small installment.

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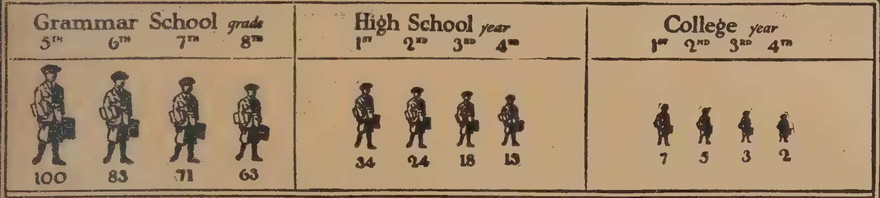
THE LIGHT THAT NEVER FAILS



Here is the significant story of the children who enter the 5th grade of the public schools of the United States. Only 63 of each 100 graduate from grammar school—13 from high school—and 2 from college, according to Bulletin No. 34 of the U. S. Bureau of Education.

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The Metropolitan Life Insurance Company will arrange, if you like, to supply your boy (or girl) with funds needed, in case of your untimely death—or if you live, for that matter. If interested in this phase of the question, write for booklet describing our Educational Fund policy.

But in any event begin now to prepare for what you must do *in case you live*. Statistical records prove that of the parents who read this page most of them will live for fifteen years or more, but failing to make early and proper preparation will be unable to carry out their present good intentions as to educating their children.

HALEY FISKE, *President*

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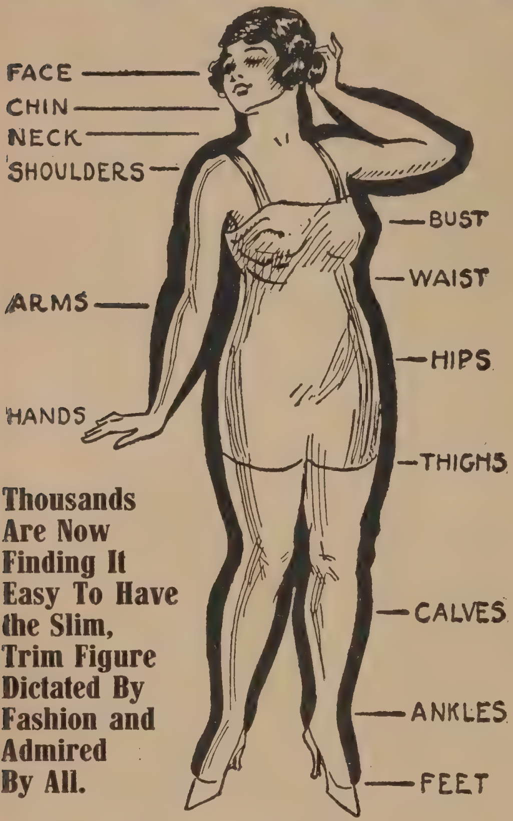

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The wonderful thing about the scientific formula known as Rid-O-Fat is that in losing your superfluous fat you should gain added vigor, health and energy of mind and body.

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There is nothing which adds to a person's age so much as fat. A few extra pounds makes any man or woman look from five to ten years older. Not only that, the excess weight and increased heart action saps vitality and energy.

Once the gland which controls your fat is functioning properly your food should be turned into firm, solid flesh and muscle. As your weight comes down to normal you should experience a delightful and amazing improvement in your appearance. You should not only feel and look younger—you should actually be younger. You should also be in better health—a real health of energy—not the fictitious and deceiving health of fat that insurance companies say shortens the life ten years.

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"When I wrote for your Rid-O-Fat sample I weighed 245 pounds. Today, which is 30 days later, I weighed only 204 pounds. A reduction of 41 pounds in a month. I am delighted. Please send me another 30-day treatment, as I want to reduce to 145 pounds, which is the correct weight for my height. I am sure that I will realize my ambition with Rid-O-Fat and I feel better than I have in years."

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"According to weight tables I weighed exactly 20 pounds too much. Rid-O-Fat reduced me to normal in just a little more than three weeks. I feel better, don't get tired, and my friends say I look like a new person."

Generous Sample FREE

I want every fat person to have a chance to try Rid-O-Fat in their own homes at my expense. I don't want them to take my word or that of the thousands who have used it. I want them to see for themselves that the results are more pleasing than anything I can say. To introduce Rid-O-Fat in a million more homes I will send a free sample to anyone who will write for it. In fact it is really more than a sample, as it is sufficient to reduce the average person several pounds. I will also send with the sample an interesting booklet that explains the scientific reason for fat, and why Rid-O-Fat meets with the highest approval.

Costs Nothing! Don't send a penny—I will send the sample and the booklet under plain wrapper and fully postpaid. This does not obligate you in any way and is never to cost you a cent. It is simply a limited offer I am making to more generally introduce Rid-O-Fat.

This free offer is good for only a short time, so send me your name and address on the coupon below or a post card, and I will see that the generous sample and booklet are mailed immediately under plain wrapper postpaid. Do not try to get Rid-O-Fat at drug stores as it is distributed only direct from my laboratory to you—remember this is a short time offer and send your name at once. H. C. HAIST, Whinton Laboratories, 1518 Coca Cola Bldg., Kansas City, Mo.

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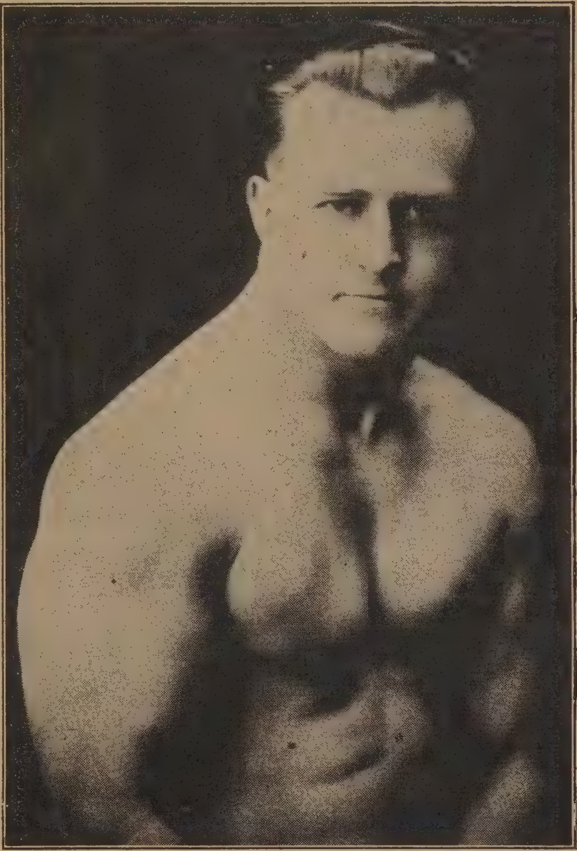

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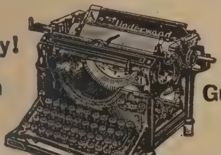

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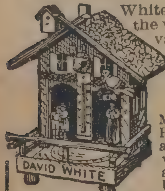

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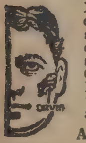

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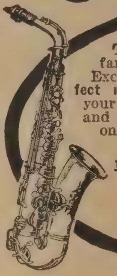

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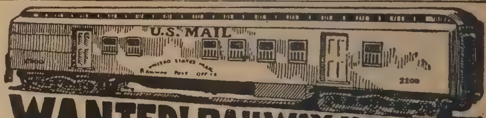

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Men and Women 17 to 45 Years—$1600 to $2600—Common Education Sufficient —Travel—See the Country—No Lay-offs—Lifetime Job—Holidays With Pay.

Write today for free list of positions obtainable and information how to get a position.

United Business Tr. Ass'n, 211 Dinan Bldg., Detroit, Mich.

20¢ A DAY PAYS for a Piano

Before you buy a Player-Piano or Piano, get our beautifully illustrated FREE Book showing popular models of famous sweet-toned Symphonic. Easy payments. Save $100 or more. 25-year Guarantee. Write TODAY.

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BUFFALO, N. Y. Peoria, Ill. Chicago, Ill.

PIMPLES

Your Skin can be Quickly Cleared of Pimples, Blackheads Acne Eruptions on the face or body, Barbers Itch, Eczema, Enlarged Pores, Oily or Shiny Skin.

FREE Write today for my FREE Booklet, "*A Clear-Tone Skin,*" telling how I cured myself after being afflicted for over fifteen years.

$1,000 Cold Cash says I can clear your skin of the above blemishes.
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Stop Using a Truss

Reduced Fac-Simile Gold Medal.

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STUART'S PLAPAO-PADS are different from the truss, being medicine applicators made self-adhesive purposely to hold the distended muscles securely in place. No straps, buckles or spring attached—cannot slip, so cannot chafe or press against the pubic bone. Thousands have successfully treated themselves at home without hindrance from work—most obstinate cases conquered.

Soft as velvet—easy to apply—inexpensive. Awarded Gold Medal and Grand Prix. Process of recovery is natural, so afterwards no further use for trusses. We prove it by sending Trial of Plapao absolutely FREE
Write name on Coupon and send TODAY.

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Name..
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Return mail will bring Free Trial Plapao..................

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Not toys—but high-grade practical instruments for Symphony or Jazz orchestra. Great for solo work at Club, Lodge or Legion gatherings or home entertainments. Anyone can play with a few simple lessons, furnished with each instrument.

Musical Pitch Fork **Glassaphone** **Jazz-O-Nette**
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Relief *for* coughs

Use PISO'S—this prescription quickly relieves children and adults. A pleasant syrup. No opiates.

35¢ and 60¢ sizes sold everywhere

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—Every Deaf Person Knows That

I make myself hear, after being deaf for 25 years, with these Artificial Ear Drums. I wear them day and night. They are perfectly comfortable. No one sees them. Write me and I will tell you a true story, how I got deaf and how I make you hear. Address

Medicated Ear Drum
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FREE *a wonderful Book on Finger Prints*

Full of thrilling crime mysteries solved through finger print evidence by America's greatest experts. Gripping illustrations. True stories.

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YOU can make 15 to 50 dollars a week at Home, IN YOUR SPARE TIME, Easily learned by our New Simple Method. No canvassing. Experience unnecessary. We teach you how, guarantee you steady work and pay you cash no matter where you live. Write today for free sample lesson and Illustrated Booklet.

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10¢ A DAY and Up

Bargain Prices

Celebrated Symphonola Phonographs. Genuine Mahogany, Walnut, or Oak. Portable and cabinet models. 10c. a day and up pays. Plays any record. Write TODAY for Big FREE Book.

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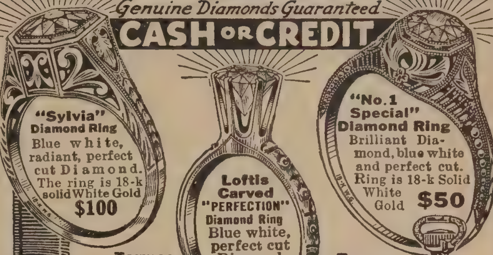
LOFTIS BROS. & CO. EST'D 1858

DIAMONDS WATCHES

Genuine Diamonds Guaranteed

CASH OR CREDIT



"Sylvia" Diamond Ring Blue white, radiant, perfect cut Diamond. The ring is 18-k solid White Gold **$100**

Terms: $10 Down, **$2.50** a Week

Loftis Carved "PERFECTION" Diamond Ring Blue white, perfect cut Diamond **$75**

"No. 1 Special" Diamond Ring Brilliant Diamond, blue white and perfect cut. Ring is 18-k Solid White Gold **$50**

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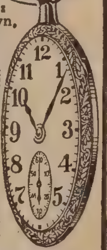

Loftis Carved "Perfection" Ring is 14-k Solid Green Gold, Diamond set in White Gold prongs. Bridal Blossom design. Special at $75
Terms: $7.50 with order or on delivery, then $2.00 a week until paid.
Also up to $2,500. Wedding Rings to match.

Diamonds, Watches, Jewelry
FOR CHRISTMAS GIFTS

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Over 2,000 illustrations of Diamond-set Jewelry. Watches, Wrist Watches, Pearls, Mesh Bags, Silverware, etc.—gifts by which you will always be remembered. Select as many articles as you wish and have all charged in one account. Sent prepaid for your Free Examination. **Send for Catalog.**

Rectangular Wrist Watch 18-k White Gold, 17 Jewels, $35; 14-k, 15 Jewels, $29. Yours for $3.50 down, then **$1.00** a Week until paid.

Money Back if not Satisfied

LOFTIS BROS. & CO.
National Jewelers
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108 N. State St., Chicago, Ill.
Stores in Leading Cities

17 Jewel ELGIN No. 15—Green Gold, engraved, assorted patterns, guaranteed 25 years. 12 Size, gilt dial **$32**

Terms: $3.25 Down, then **$1.00** a Week.

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This simplified, complete High School Course—specially prepared for home study by leading professors—meets all requirements for entrance to college and the leading professions.

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.........General Education
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.........Business Law
.........Lawyer
.........Machine Shop Practice
.........Photoplay Writer
.........Mechanical Engineer
.........Shop Superintendent
.........Employment Manager
.........Steam Engineer
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The Odds Are Long—4 to 1 Against you

Pyorrhea Follows Bleeding Gums

At the first sign of bleeding gums, watch out for Pyorrhea. It strikes four persons out of every five past forty, and thousands younger, too.

Brush your teeth with Forhan's For the Gums. If used consistently and used in time, it will prevent Pyorrhea or check its progress. As a dentifrice, it will keep your teeth white and clean, your gums firm and healthy. Pleasant to the taste. At all druggists, 35c and 60c in tubes.

Formula of
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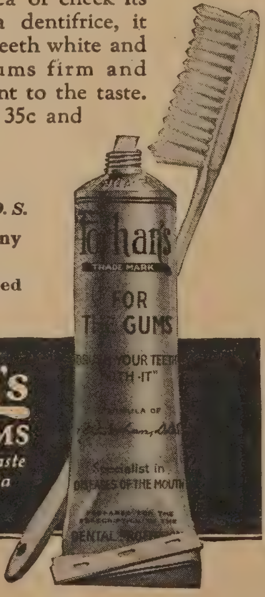

Forhan's

FOR THE GUMS

More than a tooth paste
—it checks Pyorrhea

"Just the thing for"- - -

A Gift that Everyone Wants the "Take-a-Picture-Package"

"Just what I wanted"—what a joyful satisfaction it is to hear that glad cry on Christmas morning. And you'll hear it surely if you choose the new Ansco Take-a-Picture-Package for your present.

A neat, durable red case, a sturdy smooth working handsome Ansco Camera, [pictures 2¼ x 3¼ in.], four rolls of the wonderful Ansco Speedex Film, and the handy little Ansco album to keep the snaps in,—that's the Take-a-Picture-Package, complete for five dollars! By far the greatest camera outfit value we've ever heard of.

Be sure to see the Take-a-Picture-Package before making up your Christmas list. It will solve the old "what-shall-I-give" question for practically everybody. If your dealer hasn't it send us his name and address.

CAMERAS ANSCO FILM

ANSCO COMPANY, BINGHAMTON, N.Y.

A perfect base for face powder. Apply a little cream. When nearly dry dust on the powder.

Now for his Face!
Let's give him Mama's Complexion Cream

Copyright 1923
A. S. Hinds Co.

COLD winds injure a delicate, tender complexion, and so does the sudden change from indoors to frosty air. Roughness and chapping usually follow any prolonged exposure unless the skin is protected with a softening and healing emollient like HINDS Honey and Almond CREAM.

Many who love the bracing, cold weather have found that by applying Hinds Cream to any sore, irritated surfaces, or to parts of the body that have been chafed or compressed by warm clothing, they can make themselves comfortable at once.

You can use this cream freely at any time, on the face, neck, arms and hands, with absolute assurance of deriving gratifying results. It is economical and agreeable. The treatment is simple.

Hinds Cre-mis Face Powder, surpassing in quality and refinement; distinctive in fragrance and effect. White, flesh, pink, brunette. Boxes, 60c, 15c. Samples, 2c.

All dealers sell Hinds Honey and Almond Cream, 50c., $1.00. We will mail a sample for 2c, trial bottle 6c, traveler size, 10c. Try-out Box of 5 Samples, assorted, 10c. Booklet Free.

Write A. S. HINDS CO.
Dept. 24, Portland, Me., U. S. A.

In the sick room Hinds Cream gives grateful comfort to the patient.

Chapped cheeks, hands, knees, and ankles quickly relieved with Hinds Cream.

In Southern winter resorts Hinds Cream is depended upon by tourists to keep the complexion attractive.

For baby's skin troubles Hinds Cream soothes and comforts. Dilute the cream one-half with water.

After shaving use Hinds Cream to soothe and relieve irritation from close shave or soap.

A Christmas Hint from Santa Claus

Give

Eveready Flashlights

The New Hupmobile

MUCH greater power accounts for the magnificently improved performance of the new Hupmobile.

Not only greater speed, but smoother engine action at all
spe -away like a shot,
an gear that
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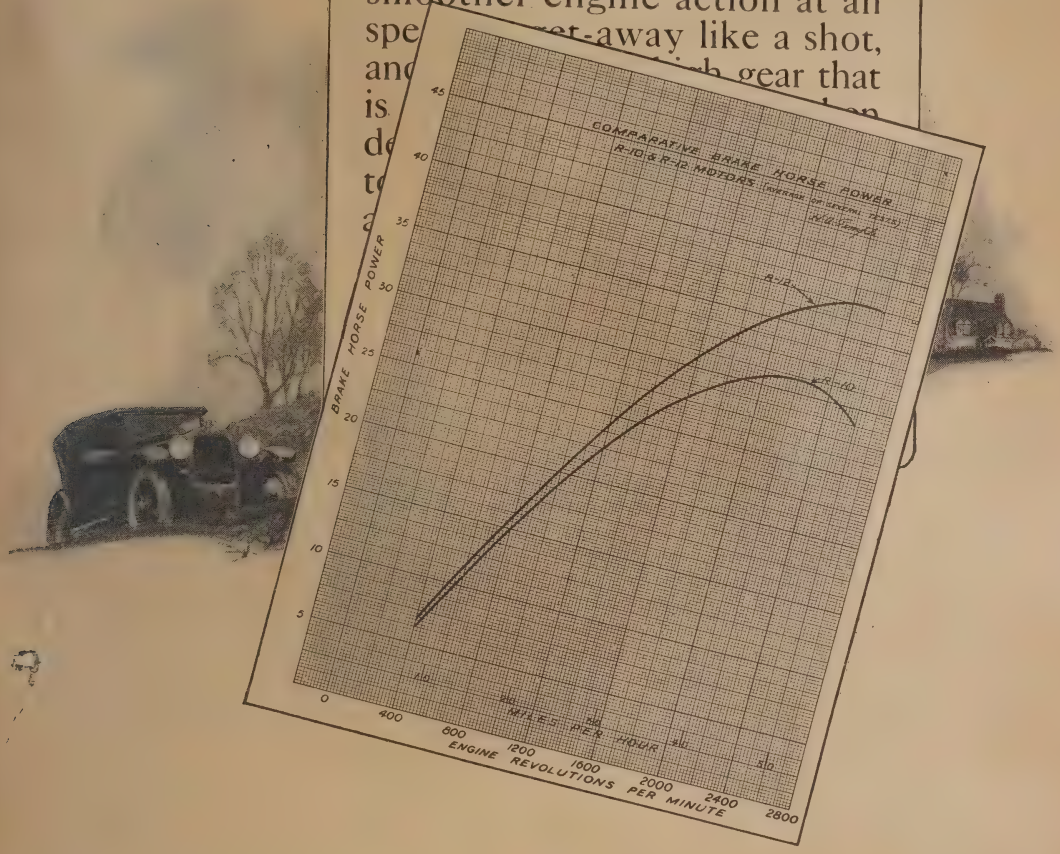


The power curve chart reproduced above represents a very close approach to the engineering ideal in the development of power by an automobile engine.

You will note that the upper curve—which records not one test, but the average of a number of tests with the new Hupmobile—shows a steady increase in power up to a speed of 50 miles per hour.

Moreover, this maximum power is sustained, as the curve shows, over a range from about 2300 engine revolutions per minute to about 2600 revolutions per minute.

The upper curve means a more complete elimination of vibration and other physical forces which tend to interfere with full and free power development.

A heavier counter balanced crankshaft, larger bearings, lighter pistons and connecting rods—these are some of the engineering refinements which make it possible for the new Hupmobile to develop its greater power so easily and so smoothly.

Never before have we built such an engine. Never before has any Hupmobile—fine as they all have been—given its owners such splendid results in all the performance-abilities which make or mar the owner's satisfaction.

Hupp Motor Car Corporation, Detroit, Michigan

50¢

Spur Tie

Pat. June 13, 1922 Reg. U.S. Pat. Off.

THE GIFT FOR A MAN!

GIVE him the gift he'd select for himself—a stylish convenient Spur Tie Bow. For Christmas in attractive gift boxes, at all good dealers. *Comes all tied for him—by hand.* Two sizes—many patterns. An exclusive patented feature prevents curling, rolling or wrinkling. Insist on the genuine. Look for the name Spur on the tie.

ALL TIED FOR YOU

Write for Style Book C

HEWES & POTTER, Boston, Mass.

Makers of BULL-DOG

Suspenders and Garters, guaranteed 365 days' wear. Bull-Dog Belts—Vestoff Suspenders—Spur Tie Four-in-Hands.

DO YOU WANT TO EARN MORE MONEY?

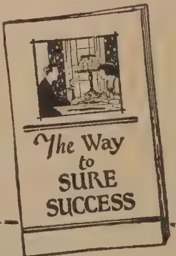
DO you need more money than you are earning to-day? Have you obligations that you want to pay off? Do you want a position that will yield a good immediate income and has a future as large as you can make it?

If you do, you are just the kind of man we want to sell Better Brushes in the great district east of the Mississippi, north of Tennessee. If you put your shoulder to the wheel and give a reasonable amount of time and attention to the work, there is practically no limit to how far you can advance with this company.

Better Brush Salesmen *make no deliveries.* Every day is free for positive, profitable effort. Better Brush Salesmen *are paid regularly.*

Write For This Booklet

An opportunity like this may never come again. Don't let it slip by. At least cut out and mail the coupon printed below and find out what there is in this proposition for you. You will be especially interested in the booklet, *"The Way to Sure Success,"* which tells how our sales have increased from $2800 per month to $80,000 a month in three years, and how you can share in this prosperity.



BETTER BRUSHES, Inc.,
51 Church Street, Palmer, Mass.

Without cost or obligation, please send me a copy of your booklet, *"The Way to Sure Success,"* and tell me how I may secure a position as a "Better Brush" Sales Representative.

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WHEN WINTER COMES

a handy, dependable package of Brown's Bronchial Troches is as necessary as warm clothing. They quickly relieve sore throat, coughing, loss of voice and kindred troubles. A real REMEDY—not a candy. At druggists. In 3 size packages.

JOHN I. BROWN & SON, BOSTON, MASS.

General Sales Agents: Harold F. Ritchie & Co., Inc.
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BROWN'S Bronchial TROCHES

COUGH AND VOICE LOZENGES

HEALTH

is the Greatest Joy of Life. Only the robust, vigorous and healthy can enjoy life to its fullest. The complaining, ailing, sickly ones are unhappy, discontented, dejected, failures. For many years I have been making people well through Strongfortism. I have helped tens of thousands to become strong. No matter what ails you, write me fully about it, and I will prove to you I can help you. The experience and research of a lifetime are contained in my wonderful FREE BOOK ***"Promotion and Conservation of Health, Strength, and Mental Energy."*** Send a ten cent piece (one dime) to cover postage.

LIONEL STRONGFORT
Physical and Health Specialist
1208 STRONGFORT INSTITUTE, Newark, N. J.

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Perfect Man

STRONGFORTISM

MONEY—POSITION—POWER

can be yours. Find the position in life you were born to fill and it will be easier to climb the ladder of success than to slide down the pole of failure. Why drift along in a rut, trusting to luck, when the BOLGER VOCATIONAL CHART will enable men in a few hours of easy self analysis to discover, without fail, their rightful position in life? Thousands placed on the Road to Success. Write today for free inspiring booklet.

The E. A. Penn Company, 158-F W. 45th St., New York

LEARN Electricity

Great Shops of Coyne—complete in 3½ months. $200,000 worth of electrical equipment.

Earn $200 to $600 a Month

Enter anytime. Special limited offer. Drafting and Radio Free. *Send for big free catalog.* Act now!

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WORN BY MILLIONAIRES

And Society Leaders

WHO leave the genuine in their vaults. Reproduced from $500 ring. Brilliant flash of rainbow fire from the three imported **diamond-cut** gems!

SEND NO MONEY 3.98

Pay postman 3.98 and postage on arrival. Money back guarantee. Limited number. None to dealers. **FREE**--Velvet lined ART LEATHER Gift Case for this gorgeous Ring.

BRADLEY BOSTON CO.,
H-9 Newton, Mass.

PIMPLES

CAN BE CURED. If you suffer from pimples, acne, blackheads, brown spots or eruptions I want to send you my simple home treatment under plain wrapper. It gave me a soft, velvety, smooth and radiant complexion, and cured thousands of men and women, after everything else failed. Simply send name for generous 10 day free trial offer of my secret home treatment.

W. H. WARREN, 489 Gray Building, KANSAS CITY, MO.

For Backward KIDDIES

12 Pills—10c
40 Pills—25c
90 Pills—50c

Mothers, do you know constipation causes most children's ailments? When your little one is constipated, give Beecham's Pills at once. Tasteless, harmless, gentle yet thoroughly effective, Beecham's Pills keep the delicate, growing organs of digestion vigorous, and elimination regular and complete. (*See Booklet*).

Beecham's Pills

FREE TRIAL. Send your name and address to our Sales Agents, B. F. ALLEN CO., Dept. B-4, 417 Canal St., New York, for FREE Packet of Beecham's Pills and Booklet, "The Way to Health."

RECOMMENDED BY PHYSICIANS

for

Neuralgia
Neuritis
Lumbago
Rheumatism
Sprains
Skin afflictions
Congestions
Sciatica
Muscular and nervous disorders

our informative booklet Doctor Sun, shows the wide and effective uses for Stein-O-Lite —send for it!

Arresting Pain with "Concentrated Sunlight"

INSTEAD of hot water, messy poultices, intolerable plasters, etc., modern medical science today uses a new, clean and infinitely more effective method of relieving pain.

It is—*Radiant Heat and Light*, as perfectly produced by the Stein-O-Lite.

Why Stein-O-Lite is more effective

Old-fashioned hot applications, while helpful, have little penetrative power. They heat the surface but do not touch the seat of pain. **Stein-O-Lite's magic rays do!** They get right down into the throbbing tissues and break up the congestion thru stimulation. You can actually feel the pain-shot tissues relax and the pain die out as the warm, mellow rays—golden as tropical sunlight—play upon the tender area. Clean as sunlight, safe as sunlight, pleasant as sunlight—Stein-O-Lite does the work.

Now Stein-O-Lite can become your first aid

Because Stein-O-Lite rays cannot burn or irritate the skin (see why in panel text) any individual can use it. For the pains of little ones as well as grown-ups. Think of its convenience, too—just screw a plug into a light socket, turn the switch and a flood of pain-soothing light starts to work.

We Invite you to try a Stein-O-Lite treatment

Special Offer

We know — **and physicians know** —the great remedial powers of Stein-O-Lite. But we want you to try it—**thoroughly at our** risk on

FIVE DAYS FREE TRIAL

Send us $12 in money order, bank draft or check (also sent C. O. D. postage prepaid). If Stein-O-Lite does not prove all that our accompanying literature proclaims, return it and we will cheerfully refund money.

Stein-O-Lite rays are distributed evenly—no burning point.

Other Lamps—a focusing or burning point.

MAIL THIS COUPON

Stein-O-Lite Corp., 135 Floyd Street, Brooklyn, N. Y.

Note—If you desire the Stein O-Lite C O.D check here ☐

Gentlemen: I enclose $12 for a Stein-O-Lite with the understanding that should it prove unsatisfactory after 5 days trial I can return it—and my money will be refunded.

Name..

Address..

OUT EVERY THURSDAY **THE ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY** TEN CENTS ALL NEWS-STANDS

!
fear

Are you self-conscious about the impression you make on people?

FEAR is probably the greatest handicap anyone can have in life. It keeps you from being your own real self—from doing your downright best and from getting on in life as you should.

Personal appearance has a lot to do with the way you feel. Clothes count, of course. But still there is one thing so many people overlook—something that at once brands them as either fastidious or careless—*the teeth.*

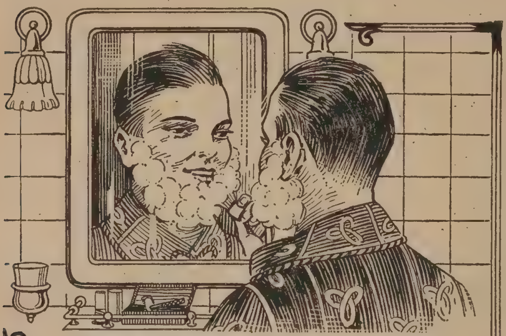
Notice today how you, yourself, watch another person's teeth when he or she is talking. If the teeth are not well kept they at once become a liability.

Only the right dentifrice—consistently used—will protect you against such criticism. Listerine Tooth Paste cleans teeth a new way. The first tube you buy will prove this to you.

You will notice the improvement even in the first few days. And, moreover, just as Listerine is the safe antiseptic, so Listerine Tooth Paste is the safe dentifrice. It cleans, yet it cannot injure the enamel.

What are your teeth saying about you today?

LAMBERT PHARMACAL CO.
St. Louis, U. S. A.



WHITING-ADAMS BRUSHES

Vulcan Rubber Cemented Shaving Brushes

True friends of shavers and razors. Easy shaves and smooth skins. Bristles, hair and handles never part company. Held with pure rubber vulcanized as hard as granite. Sterilized completely, sealed singly in packages. Infection cannot come from them.

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JOHN L. WHITING-J. J. ADAMS CO.
Boston, U. S. A.
Brush Manufacturers for Over 114 Years and the Largest in the World

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DON'T WEAR A TRUSS

MR. C. E. BROOKS

BE COMFORTABLE—Wear the Brooks Appliance, the modern scientific invention which gives rupture sufferers immediate relief. It has no obnoxious springs or pads. Automatic Air Cushions bind and draw together the broken parts. No salves or plasters. Durable. Cheap. Sent on trial to prove its worth. Beware of imitations. Look for trade-mark bearing portrait and signature of C. E. Brooks which appears on every Appliance. None other genuine. Full information and booklet sent free in plain, sealed envelope.

BROOKS APPLIANCE CO., 222 State St., Marshall, Mich.

Statement of the ownership, management, etc., of MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE, published monthly at New York, N. Y., for October 1st, 1923. Required by the Act of Congress of August 24th, 1912.

State of NEW YORK }
County of NEW YORK } s.s. :

Before me, a Notary Public, in and for the State and County aforesaid, personally appeared WM. T. DEWART, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, Publishers of MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24th, 1912, embodied in Section 443, Postal Laws and Regulations. To wit:

That the names and addresses of the Publisher, Editor, Managing Editor, and Business Manager are:

Publishers—THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, 280 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

Editor—FRANK A. MUNSEY, 280 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

Managing Editor—FRANK A. MUNSEY, 280 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

Business Manager—WM. T. DEWART, 280 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

That the Owners are: (If a corporation give its name and the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of the total amount of stock.)

THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY, 280 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

FRANK A. MUNSEY, 280 Broadway, New York, N. Y.

That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders, owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are:

There are no bonds, mortgages, or other securities against THE FRANK A. MUNSEY COMPANY.

That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company, but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

WM. T. DEWART, Business Manager.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1923.

A. V. KASS, Notary Public.
New York County, No. 28.
New York Register No. 4044.
Term expires March 30th, 1924.

(SEAL)

She Found A Pleasant Way To Reduce Her Fat

She did not have to go to the trouble of diet or exercise. She found a better way, which aids the digestive organs to turn food into muscle, bone and sinew instead of fat.

She used *Marmola Prescription Tablets* which are made from the famous Marmola prescription. They aid the digestive system to obtain the full nutriment of food. They will allow you to eat many kinds of food without the necessity of dieting or exercising.

Thousands have found that the *Marmola Prescription Tablets* give complete relief from obesity. And when the accumulation of fat is checked, reduction to normal, healthy weight soon follows.

All good drug stores the world over sell *Marmola Prescription Tablets* at one dollar a box. Ask your druggist for them, or order direct and they will be sent in plain wrapper, postpaid.

MARMOLA COMPANY
283 Garfield Bldg., Detroit, Mich.

BIG FREE BOOK
BEAUTIFUL FURNISHINGS

THE LARKIN BOOK OF BETTER HOMES
FALL 1923

The very things you need now. Latest styles. Factory-to-Family low prices. Save big money. Furnish a room or whole home. As little as $3 down; a year or more to pay. Also Pianos, Players, Phonographs. Cut out this adv.—Write TODAY, for new Fall "Larkin Book of Better Homes".

Larkin Co Inc.
Dept. 121
BUFFALO, N.Y. Peoria, Ill. Chicago, Ill.

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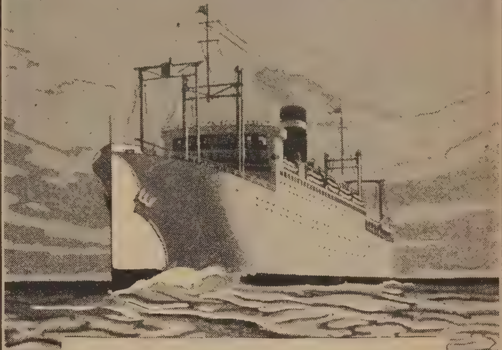
4 *sister ships to* SOUTH AMERICA



If you are considering a trip to South America this winter investigate first your own U. S. Government fleet. These great new white sister ships are oil burners of 21,000 tons and the finest and fastest vessels on the run. Rio de Janeiro is now less than 12 days from New York. A record! This great service is operated by the Munson Steamship Lines with sailings every two weeks from New York to Rio de Janeiro, Montevideo, and Buenos Aires.

Sailings:

American Legion	**Dec. 22**
Pan America	**Jan. 5**
Western World	**Jan. 19**
Southern Cross	**Feb. 2**

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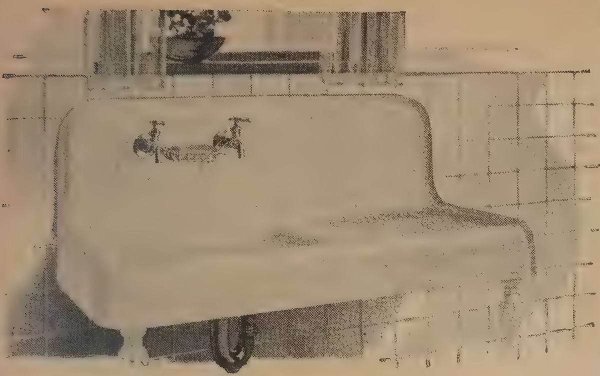

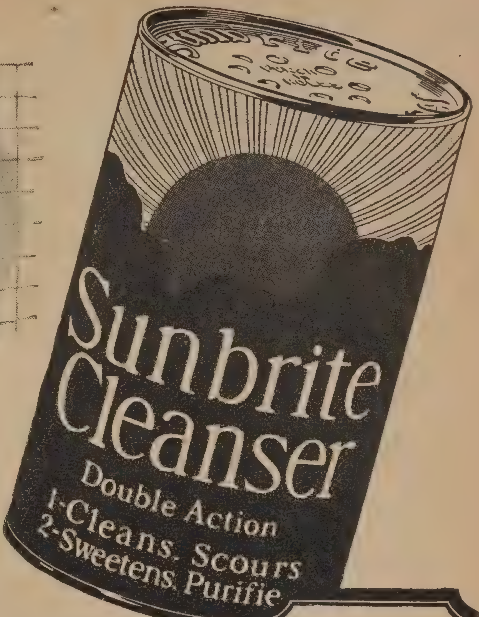

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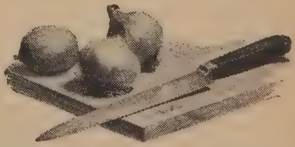

Wash thoroughly in soap suds the knife with which you have cut an onion; then cut a lemon or an apple with it—and the onion flavor is still there. A ***Sunbrite*** *cleansing not only polishes the knife but destroys every trace of the onion flavor*

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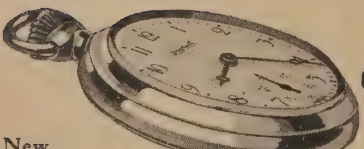

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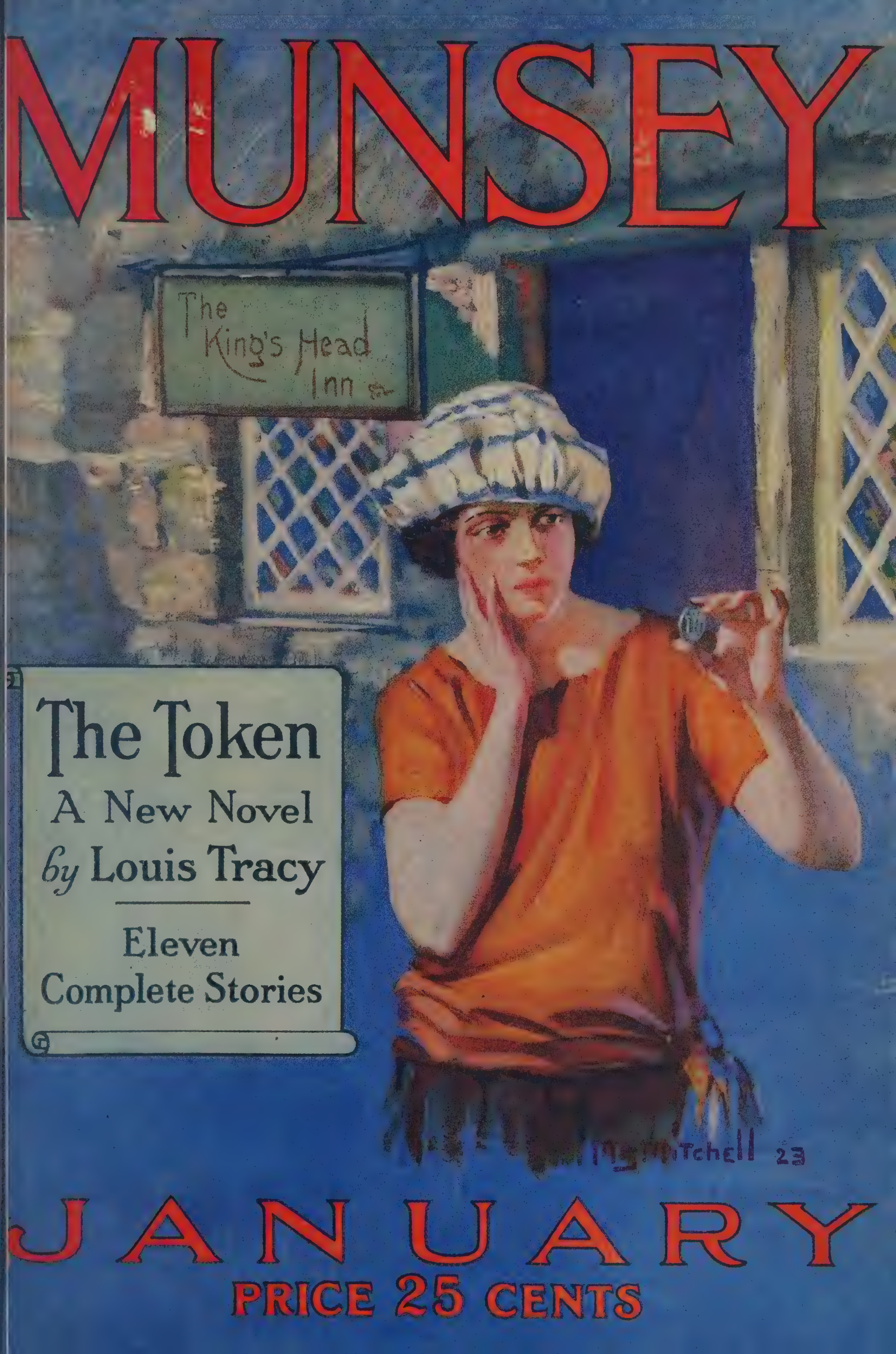

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9. —Mesquite Jenkins flashes a six-gun, and turns a triangle into a square deal.

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"HOME SWEET HOME"
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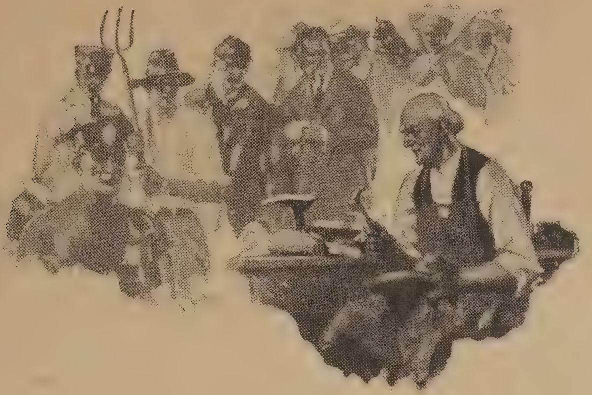

The men who are hardest on shoes will tell you why—*Nothing takes the place of Leather!*

The Old Shoemaker says:

"A-course, I may be prejudiced. I suppose I am. Ever since I was knee-high I've been working with leather in one way or another and I know there's nothing in the world like it.

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"Yes, I've tried all sorts of things for soles and heels and I've come to the conclusion that when you try to imitate nature or go her one better you're getting in over your head and hands.

"Well, come in again. Will those soles and heels wear? Why, friend, they're leather—real honest leather. There's real comfort in those shoes now and they won't come back to me again for months."

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This is what the host of those who are on their feet most will tell you. The veteran policeman, the mail man, the farmer, the soldier, the street-car conductor, the saleswoman, the structural steel worker who depends upon his footwear for a perfect grip on narrow footings far in the air—ask any of them.

They will tell you that for real economy *nothing takes the place of leather.* That for cool comfort and ease—there is nothing like leather.

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"New shoes last me five or six months, and then I have them resoled and they are good for the rest of the year. Generally I have them rebuilt once more, and that means another five months' hard wear. When you tramp a beat for hours like I do, you want your feet to feel comfortable, and you don't want to feel the pavement through them. So, I make sure that they have solid leather soles and heels. Nothing else is near so easy on the feet. I have tried other things once or twice; but I stick to leather now."

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MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE

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THE FEBRUARY MUNSEY (on sale Saturday, January 19) will contain a feature that no reader should miss—a short complete novel, "The Story of Mother Machree," by Rida Johnson Young, author of the famous song "Mother Machree." It will also contain the opening chapters of "The Twisted Foot," a stirring story of adventure in the West, by William Patterson White

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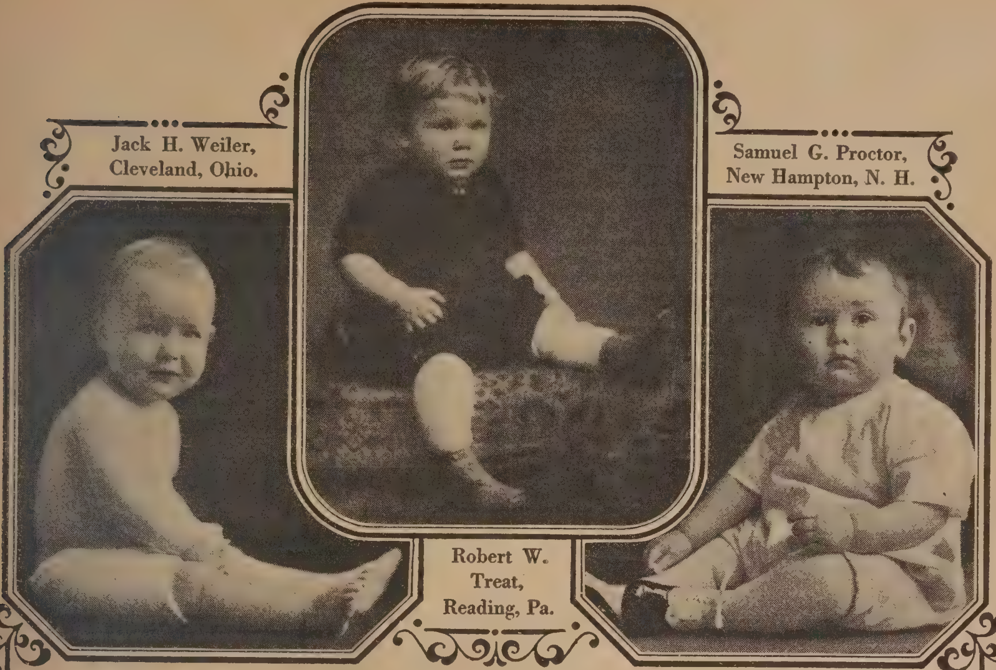

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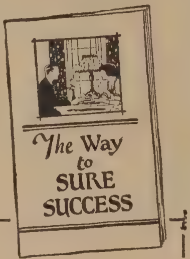
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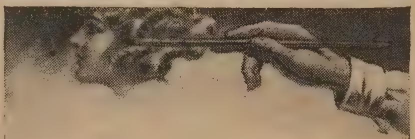

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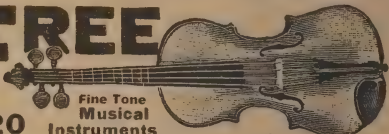

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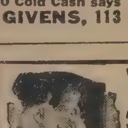

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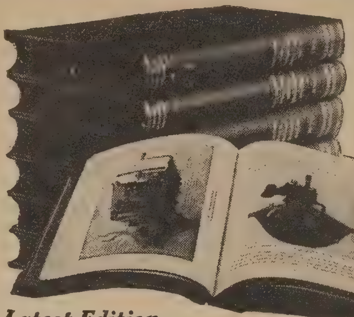

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MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE

JANUARY, 1924

Vol. LXXX NUMBER 4

The Big Noise at Nice

A COMPLETE NOVELETTE—THE MATRIMONIAL MISUNDERSTANDINGS OF JOHN VICTOR, EARL OF GAULT AND HIS BROTHER JIM

By Alice Rix

Author of "The Wife That Wasn't"

THERE was a drop of yellow in the sporting blood of John Victor Albert Alburton, Earl of Gault. He couldn't look a woman in the eye.

Women disconcerted him, discouraged him, dried him up. Their beauty mysteriously alarmed him, and its close approach sent him scrambling up the nearest tree.

The world, which concerned itself with the Earl of Gault, called him a woman hater. His sporting friends said that he was woman shy. John Victor, who was a nice boy, with no affectations, psychoanalyzed it as "feelin' like a silly ass, when women were about, and wantin' to get away."

In this modest endeavor Lord Gault was foiled by rich circumstance and smiling looks. He stood a swagger six foot three. He was darkly magnificent, and had misleading eyes. Tied to this fatal beauty were his attractive title and an irresistible rent roll.

Women hunted him on land and sea. His mother led the pack. She was a domineering woman, one of the greatest hostesses in England, and she wanted to see him married. Nervous, fiery, sex shy, rearing and plunging at petticoats, he was hitched to her social chariot from the day of his majority until he was twenty-five. Then she died, exasperated.

Thereupon Gault shut up his big houses, took a set of London chambers in Mount Street, and spent most of his time on his yacht. Congenial males flocked to his boat like gulls, and the dove sailed on the mast.

Before the end of three months woman poked her nose into this riotous peace. Between cruises, in his Mount Street rooms, Lord Gault received the news of his young brother's clandestine marriage.

The Hon. James Alburton, twenty-one, attached, as loosely as could be wangled, to the British Embassy in Paris, and entirely dependent on his brother, announced his marriage in a cheerful, arid letter from the Hôtel Splendide, Nice.

DEAR OLD JACK:

Congrats up! I'm married. Let's have the jolly old blessing in four figures. Push it along the wire to Paris. We had to beat it out of there, hush, hush, early this morning. I've got to fly back to fix up leave. I'll pick up my wife again here, and we'll make London Friday. I suppose you're on the boat, or won't mind getting aboard, by then. We'd like your rooms. This is between us. I want to tell the dear old relatives myself.—JIM.

P. S.—She's French.

Lord Gault read this letter three times and decided that it was damnably unilluminating. Two bald facts, however, grinned at him out of a jungle of sinister possibilities—Jim had eloped with a strange Frenchwoman, and he was breaking into the house with her on Friday.

Something had got to be done about it. What? Gault ramped his rooms, with the letter in his hand, his wits all scrambled into one pan. Got to do something. Got to act. How?

The mess seethed, shapeless. Gault gave it up, fell feverishly on the phone, and called up his man of business.

The call rang in at the offices of Carter, Carter & Carteret, solicitors, and was buzzed through to Sir Romney Carter's private room. He reached for the phone on his desk, lifted the transmitter lazily, and jumped as if it had bitten his ear.

"Married! Jim is?" he bawled. "Here, hold on, Jack! Give me this slow. Who is she? I said, who's the girl? Who the devil is Jessie French? *Just says* she's French! Nothing matter the line! Take your face out of the phone! Well, where are they? *She* is? Where's Jim? My hat! I say, let's have the letter. Go on—slow. Well, I'll be damned! Of course you've got to act. Hold on to the line a minute. Let me think!"

Sir Romney Carter was a rapid thinker, and his thoughts ran blithely on practical jokes. He was a jolly dog, gamboling into his thirties in high, puppyish spirits. Most of his distinguished clients were his personal friends. He guarded their property faithfully, and gleefully nipped their heels.

The man talking to him on the phone was an imperishable bone, which he kept buried in his back yard. In less than a quarter of a minute, Sir Romney had dug him up and was worrying him.

"Are you there? I say, Jack, the first thing you've got to do is to stop that leave. Cable Jim it's all right about the rooms, and let him have a thousand to make things look easy. We'll pull a wire at the embassy, and hang him up in Paris for a week. That 'll give you time to get across to Nice, and have it out with the girl alone."

Sir Romney leaned, raptly, to the phone.

"Sorry, old man—I'm full up here for a fortnight. You don't want to let her know who you are, you ass! You want to work the thing *incog.* Get introduced as somebody else, and let her give herself away. I say, Jack, you might play up to her a bit yourself. Lead her on—what? If she's a vamp, entice her off on the yacht. Oh, all right! Don't get ratty! Find out if she's a white woman, that's all. Right-oh! I'll handle the embassy myself. Thousand to the young blighter—I said, *by to-night.* Cheerio!"

Sir Romney hung up, punched the phone jovially in the ribs, and unleashed a howl. Then he summoned his clerk.

"Advise Paris Crédit, by wire, to pay a thousand to the Hon. James Alburton—Lord Gault's account—and get me on to Downing Street."

Meantime, in Mount Street, a distracted young man packed his own boxes for the Riviera Express.

"Curse and blast! Why is Harrow out? Nanny, see if you can jam this down. Get a porter up!"

A Harrow had served an Alburton since time began. The present Harrow had married the family nurse.

"'Er grace called this morning, m'lord," said Mrs. Harrow, jamming it down, "and said she'd be back later. 'Er grace's woman's come down sudden with the flu, and 'er grace said—"

"Get a porter up, Nanny! I've got about five minutes. Look out and see if the car's below."

Mrs. Harrow opened a window.

"No, m'lord—yes, it's just comin' round the corner."

"Get a porter! What are you waiting for?"

As Mrs. Harrow fled, Gault wrote hurriedly at the table by the open window.

DEAR HARROW:

My brother is married. He may be bringing his wife here while I am away. Fix them up with everything. Say nothing to the duchess, and see that Nanny doesn't. Send letters to Captain John Stirling, Hôtel Splendide, Nice, and keep shut about it. If you're asked, say I'm cruising.—GAULT.

He addressed the letter, set it against the inkstand, and made a dash for his coat. A lively draft came into the room with the porter, flirted the letter off the table, and dropped it on the window sill. It tottered there for a second, on the scales of chance, and slid out on its way to the street and the dust bins.

Mrs. Harrow closed the door on her master, after another vain attempt to give him his sister's message. She wanted to tell him that the young Dutchess of Rothair, hung up in London on her way to Nice, to look for a maid, proposed to spend the night at her brother's rooms.

II

AFTER her morning call in Mount Street, the duchess walked up Bond Street and turned into Mayol's, to have a look at the manikins. The place was crowded with people she didn't know. She nodded over the top of Mayol's head, declined a chair, and stood, with her hand on the back of it, looking at the stage.

A girl in a frock of silver *lamé* was just coming on. She slithered to the front of the stage, pulled herself up in an interrogation point, and looked at the room down her nose.

"Kitty!" squeaked the duchess.

Mayol discreetly wedged a well tailored back between her grace and the lorgnettes, and cut off her view of the stage. She rolled the chair impatiently against his legs, scooped him out of the way, and sat on the edge of it, straight as an arrow, stuck, quivering, from the bow.

The girl in the silver *lamé* was coming down from the stage, to give a close-up. The frock fitted her like her skin. The *décolletage,* cut across the base of her throat in front, ended where a waistline might have been, behind. She had no waistline, and no hips. She glittered straight up and down, like a spear stabbed through a couple of clouds of gray tulle—enormous, bouffant.

Her face was powdered dead white. Her hair was varnished, and dead black. Her eyes, gray and luminous, looked like dark pearls dropped in saucers of soot. Her mouth was painted purple—startling as a shriek. She tilted it superciliously and eeled up the room, looking the women over with the insufferable manikin eye.

The mysterious, disconcerting aura of the grand manikin got their complacency by the throat. They looked cowed, and felt fat. Their men, shopping on the lead, lost the conquering air, and goggled the impudent, uncorseted slimness foolishly, with something gluttonous in their eyes.

The duchess gave a shocked titter, as if she were sitting out a frank French farce.

"Kit-ty Con-quest!" she whispered, as the silver *lamé* swept up to her chair.

The girl drooped her blackened lids, tightened the narrow, purple slant of her mouth, pirouetted on a silver heel, and presented her naked back.

As the gray tulle swung round, the duchess clutched a handful, and dragged it to her knees.

"No, you don't! How on earth did you get here? Did somebody dare you? I was knocked flat. Didn't you hear the fall? I called to you before I thought. What are you up to? Tell me, first, when you got over. Why didn't you let me know? Is Uncle Dick—*Kitty!*"

The swift rush of whispers and giggles was smothered in the last quick word, as a cascade, tumbling brightly over rocks, drops in a pool with a splash.

Something destructive had happened to Miss Conquest's manikin nerve. Her cool pose crumpled flat. Strings under her skin twitched at the arranged insolence of her face. She screwed up her eyes, took her painted under lip in her teeth, and struggled with her breath. Under the atrocious make-up was a very young girl trying hard not to cry.

"Let go!" she choked out, pulling at the tulle. "Everybody's—Mayol—I'm *working* here!"

The duchess looked as if she had been slapped in the face. She hung on, staring.

"Let go, Alma! I can't talk to you!"

"Yes, you *can,*" said the duchess, waking up, as the tulle pannier was tweaked out of her hand. "Wait, Kitty! There's another model down. Be showing this to me. Talk turning round. You've got to tell me! Go on—slow!"

Miss Conquest got her mask straight, twisted bonelessly, and swung an arc of husky whispers.

"Uncle Dick's gone off. He smashed up in New York, and got away."

"Kitty! All your money?"

"Everything."

The duchess's eyes filled.

"Oh, how awful!"

"*Don't!*" pleaded Kitty. "You'll make me cry, too. I'd just finished at Roly's, in August. Uncle Dick was to come over to take me home. Then the lawyers wrote. Roly let me stop to teach, but she was rotten about it. A year's fees due — extras and everything — and I didn't have a bean!"

"Oh, Kitty, why didn't you come straight to me?"

"*Don't!* I ran away last month to Paris, with Anne. Look at this thing, Alma!"

"I am looking. Anne who?"

"Little English maid at Roly's—remember? Mayol put us both in to train over there. He dumped Anne into the sales. She wasn't cheeky enough."

"Oh, it's *awful!*" The duchess caught the girl's hands. "Kitty, you mustn't—"

"I'll meet you somewhere for tea," whispered Miss Conquest, nervously retrieving her hands. "Rumpel—"

"No—wait! I'm in my brother's rooms—16 Mount Street. He's going off to-night on his boat. We'll be by ourselves. Roth's away, too. Fix up to stop all night, can you? Remember—16 Mount Street."

"Yes—I'd love it. I'll have to go now, Alma. Mayol—"

"Oh, I'll buy this thing—we can talk trying on." The duchess jumped up. "Mayol!"

Mayol bowed, deferentially, from behind her chair. His discreet eyes had been turned away. His long ears had been laid back flat. His varnished head was filled with a big noise.

The great Mayol was a Paris mongrel. He put the wits of three nations into the making and selling of women's clothes.

Two hours later, divested of his elegant frock, with his varnish squiffed up in spikes, and a well bitten brier between his teeth, he furiously sketched and muttered at his desk in his private office. He was busy with the destiny of Miss Kitty Conquest.

"*Peau, blanc de neige—yeux d'une belle amoureuse—risette, diable—Jeanne!*"

"Hullo!"

A tall English girl got up from her desk in the corner, and crossed to his. She carried a sheet of foolscap covered with small writing and big figures.

"How's that?" asked Mayol, tapping his sketch of Miss Conquest in gauzy black.

"How's that?" asked Jeanne, laying a memo of the Duchess of Rothair's purchases beside the sketch.

"That's a full hand, Janey, my girl!" replied Mayol, chucking his French after his frock coat. "That's a sure thing! That's a cinch! That's my society clothes peg and her ducal chaperon, doin' a double turn on the Riviera! D'ye get me?"

"I do not," said his wife, sitting on the arm of his chair.

Mayol stuffed and lighted his pipe.

"Well, now, here's the idea. These London women are shy on the manikins. They'll fall for anythin' once they've seen it on one of their own backs, but the girls make 'em nervous. The kid here's the real thing. She's one of 'em. She's up against it with an embezzlin' uncle. The duchess has just found it out, an' she's takin' her home to-night to cry over her. Thick as thieves—school together, an' all."

"How did you find out all that?"

"Mindin' my own business. Now, then! Conquest hasn't been seen in the shop by the big set. I'm goin' to send her over to Nice with the magpie stuff, 'stead of givin' a show with the girls. No manikin business! She's to be a rich American—same hotel as the duchess—goin' everywhere together—dresses from us." He shuffled open half a dozen audacious black and whites, on his desk. "She'll make a big noise on the Riviera!"

"She wouldn't wear this cheeky stuff on the Riviera," said Jeanne, rapidly running over the sketches. "She wouldn't be there at all—alone—a young American girl—"

"She's a widow."

"Dennis, you're the limit!"

"I am that! Get on with 'em, Janey. Put 'em all on black and white, overtime. Tell Anne she's to go along as maid, and to start practice, keepin' her mouth shut. Send the kid up to me. Hold on—take a letter down. I'll give her one she can show to the duchess."

III

THAT afternoon, at five o'clock, Miss Conquest tumbled out of a taxi in Mount Street. She tore up the stairs of No. 16 without waiting for the lift. She beat the devil's own tattoo on the door of Lord Gault's chambers, and rushed past an astonished manservant like a high wind.

"Where are you? Which room? Alma, I'm going to Nice, to the Splendide, for a whole month, to-morrow night! Don't wake me up!"

"What are you talking about, Kitty?" asked the duchess. "Do you mean it?"

"Pity the poor shop girl! A life of toil!" cried Kitty, pulling the hug down on the Chesterfield. "I'm a rich young widow with vamp weeds, and Anne's my maid, and we're both to have our heads chopped off if we breathe Mayol!"

"Is yours on tight? You don't sound like it."

"Read it!" A photo tumbled out of Kitty's muff with Mayol's letter. "That's nothing—a photo I brought you. Read the letter first."

The duchess opened it excitedly.

"Ripping!" she began. She read on, and flushed angrily. "He's mad!"

"Why?"

"The widow part, I mean. You can't—"

"*Can't* I? And, Alma, we'll split Anne, shall we? If you don't have to stop to hunt a maid, we could get off together."

"Yes, of course; but about this widow trick. It's perfectly disgusting of Mayol. He says himself it's because a young girl couldn't be there on her own. You'll be with me, Kitty. You don't want to—"

"But I *do* want to! It's going to be topping fun every minute. Who's going to find out? I don't know anybody over here, except you and the girls at school. I wouldn't care, anyhow. I'm down and out, now. I might as well get some fun out of it. Look!" She suddenly poked her photo under Alma's nose. "Do you like it?"

"Sweet!" said the duchess absently. She pushed the photo aside, and put her arm around the girl. "Kitty, I want you to do as I ask—give up all this horrid Mayol business, and come to us. I'd love it. Roth would, too."

Kitty clung for a minute silently.

"I know! You're too dear—I couldn't!" She got up quickly, her eyes full of tears, and went over to the fire. "Where is Rothair?"

"India. On his way home, I mean, now. He'll make you, Kitty."

Miss Conquest shook her head, and set her photo up on the mantel.

"Who's this—Lord Gault?" she asked, picking up one that had fallen. "I'd like to see what he looks like. Oh, this is Jim."

"*Jim!*" The duchess started up. "Of course—Jim! Kitty, you ought to marry Jim. Why didn't I think of it before?"

"Because you've only just this minute gone potty."

"It's a peerless thought," retorted the duchess, chasing it to the fireplace. "There's Thorwood—right next to us. It isn't in the entail—Jack would give it to Jim, and he and Roth would allow him—Kitty, you've got to do it! You look frightfully happy with Jim"—setting her younger brother's photo next to Kitty's. "Tell you what, sister Kate—I'll wireless him to fix up a month's leave and meet us at Nice."

"Tell him to come right on to the church," grinned Kitty.

The duchess's younger brother had already gone to Nice, and right on to the church.

The Hon. James Alburton was one of those who get there quick. He had lifted a willing infant over a convent wall at Neuilly, and had whistled in a couple of war brothers—one in holy orders, and the other in the Royal Air Force. He was flown with his prize to Nice, married to her, and flown back alone to Paris. He swooped, from the air, on his honeymoon leave and his brother's blessing, hot from the wire, while Sir Romney Carter was blasphemously getting in touch with Downing Street. He was flown back to Nice, where he caught up his bride, and together they kept on flying across the Channel to England.

The Hon. Jims were picking up their luggage, expressed to Victoria, at seven minutes to eight on Friday evening, when the duchess, Kitty, Anne, and the dressing bags cut in, on their way to the Riviera Express.

Jim quailed. The duchess was a little like her late managing mother. She had concentrated on Jim, and had got a promise out of him to let her pick out his wife; and here was Jim's wife snuggling contentedly into the small of his back. The thing wanted explaining, and Jim wanted time to think it out.

He used a light left that stacked the surprised little bride up against the luggage, and rushed on his sister with his right.

"Hullo!" he cried cordially, trying to turn her around. "Hullo!"

"Jimmy!" The duchess stood like a

rock. "Where did you tumble from? I've been wirelessing to you. Here's Kitty Conquest. Hurry up and get your ticket, and come along with us to Nice!"

"Awf'ly pleased, Miss Conquest. Awf'ly sorry, Ally. I've only come over with a toothbrush. Got to see the old prime—"

The duchess's attention was wandering. It froze to a rakish French silhouette, nestling to the trunks, labeled "Hon. J. Alburton, London," which presumably housed Jim's toothbrush. At that instant, Jim looked nervously over his shoulder. Mrs. Jim, who was no actress, smiled radiantly and waved a small mitt.

"Don't let us detain you," the duchess said frigidly. "Tickets, Anne!"

She whisked Kitty through the gates and hurried down the platform.

"Here, I say, Ally! This is my—"

"Ticket, sir?"

"I only want to speak to—"

"Platform ticket, sir?"

"Damn!"

Jim collected his wife and lifted her into a taxi. He sternly gave the Mount Street address to the man in front, got in beside the innocent, and gathered her into a fierce, protecting embrace.

Harrow opened the door of Lord Gault's chambers, and recognized the Hon. James Alburton with a paternal smile—which was instantly slain by the sight of the young man's companion. He stood, defensively, in the doorway.

"Bow, you old duffer!" shouted Jim, giving him a slap on the chest that made him cough. "They look like that over here when they're happy," he explained to his wife, and pushed her in.

Harrow remained clinging to the door knob until he was torn from it by the porters, who staggered in under the luggage.

"Get it along into the bedroom, old joss," said Jim, demonstratively unwrapping his wife on the Chesterfield. "Where's old Nan?"

"Mrs. 'Arrow's away, sir," replied Harrow, rising to defend his hearth. "Hin Devonshire, sir."

Mrs. Harrow, returning from Devonshire at that moment, put a beaming face in at the door behind the Chesterfield. Harrow fiercely pushed it out, and, the sinful luggage disposed of, followed it.

A few moments later, Mrs. Harrow went down the servants' stairs, on her way to her sister's, and Harrow returned, sorrowfully, to duty. He found the wanton acquiring the English speech on the Hon. Jim's knee.

"G-gait," she giggled sweetly.

"*Tiens! Le voici maintenant. Vu toujours!*" whispered Jim.

The giggle was obediently turned on the outraged Harrow.

"G-gait move on, ol' man — we wan' somesing to dr-reenk!"

"Colos-*sal!*" roared Jim, smothering her.

"Whisky or brandy, sir?" asked Harrow, averting stony eyes from the Chesterfield.

"Champagne, you old ass!"

IV

THE Earl of Gault wrote the undistinguished name of "Captain John Stirling, London," on the register of the Hôtel Splendide, to the disgust of the desk clerk, who recognized him.

He was also recognized, a little doubtfully, by Mrs. Gunther-Gray, an American much abroad, with her young daughters, Betty and Patty.

"That's the Earl of Gault, Betty, isn't it? Remember? He was pointed out to us at Ranelagh."

Betty drifted over to the desk and back.

"No, mother—it's a Captain Stirling."

That evening, as Captain Stirling entered the Casino, Mrs. Gunther-Gray, leaving it, slipped and twisted her foot. The acquaintance, begun in the captain's arms, duly progressed.

"Have you met a Mrs. Alburton—the Hon. Mrs. Alburton—over here?" inquired the sleuth, in a conversational tone about as light as lead.

Mrs. Gunther-Gray hadn't. No, she didn't know the Hon. Mrs. Alburton by sight, either. French, was she? So many Frenchwomen at Nice, this season, weren't there? Rather odd, wasn't it?

It was very odd, and very bewildering. Better have a look around!

Hotel foyer — restaurant—café—terrace —palm court — Promenade des Anglais— English tea shop — theaters — cinemas— Casino.

Then backward—Casino—cinemas—theaters—English tea shop, and so on.

Tall, dark, magnificent, miserable—feeling like a silly ass.

"*Ce beau capitaine Anglais, le voici encore! Que diable cherche-t-il?*"

His sister-in-law, *mesdames* — the Hon. Mrs. Alburton. French—that was all he knew about her.

The Hon. Mrs. Alburton was coy as a needle in a haystack. Nobody had met her, seen her, or heard of her.

"Have you met"—and so forth.

People began to notice it. By the end of another day, Captain Stirling was the subject of ribald jest.

"Found your little lady friend?" asked a fat man, with a disgusting wink.

Now what? Get on with it! Flop around like a blinking owl, staring at snickering Frenchwomen until one of 'em turns into your sister-in-law! Keep your ears up, like a confounded jack rabbit, listening for somebody to shout the family name! Rotten!

Captain Stirling had got around to the hotel foyer again on Saturday afternoon, when his sister passed in within an inch of his nose. Unrecognizably swaddled in furs and a motor veil, worn like a yashmak, the duchess was leaning on Anne's arm. She walked to a bench by the lift, sank on it, and closed her eyes.

Kitty was at the desk.

"The Duchess of Rothair is indisposed. Her grace wishes her party registered as Lady Mallory, Mrs. Mallory, and maid, London."

"Lady Mallory, Miss Mallory, and maid," said the clerk, restraining tears.

"*Mrs.* Mallory," corrected Kitty, blushing a bright Dubarry. "Her grace requires an English doctor at once, and would like another suite—one adjoining the rooms reserved for her."

"I am sorry, *madame*, but both those suites are engaged. I could give her grace one on the same floor."

"That will do, then, thank you. The doctor, please, at once!"

Kitty stepped back, and planted a vicious French heel on the foot of a man passing behind her.

"Oh, I'm sorry!" she apologized.

"My fault 'tirely," said Gault.

He charged heavily out of her way, got off on the wrong foot, and bumped crashingly into her.

"Frightf'ly sorry! Frightf'ly awkward of me!" he said furiously, wishing he had killed the girl on the spot.

The crowd, moved by the mob instinct, suddenly surged all one way, and slapped him up against her.

"Frightf'ly sorry! Frightf'ly awkward of me!" he said again, wishing they had both been killed on the spot.

He struggled savagely to escape, and found himself hitched by the top button of his coat to the top of Kitty's blouse.

"Frightf'ly—"

"Oh, don't say it again!" gasped Kitty weakly, as she tried to unhitch him. "Do you think you could—"

He couldn't. He fumbled, raging. The button leered at him, edge up, and buried itself in the embroidery.

His awkward fingers brushed Kitty's neck. The touch of the cool, smooth skin flashed through him like the sting of steel. He could feel the little quivers of laughter running over her soft body and shuddering into his nerves. He could see the curve of a white chin, the corner of a fresh mouth.

The button swam about like a fish. He could smell violets. The blood pounded in his head. Sickening things, violets! Hated 'em! Hated—snap!

"Frightf'ly sorry!"

He plunged blindly for the lift.

The lift smelled of violets. So did his room. It was full of white chins and rose-colored laughter. He flung the windows wide, sat down, and wrote rudely to Sir Romney Carter.

Miss Conquest, stepping from the lift, saw a dark face glowering out of a smoke cloud, through the open door of a room next to the lift. She was shown to her own rooms, directly opposite, and bestowed on the room page a smile that addled his French brains.

The English doctor put the duchess to bed.

"Flu? Nonsense, my dear young lady! Chill—nerves!"

"Rotten for you, Kitty," croaked Alma, sitting up in bed for her tea. "Tell you what—go down for meals and walks in sport things. You'll have every man in Nice tearing after you, in those things of Mayol's."

"Do you think I will?" asked Miss Conquest pensively.

She selected a vampish black tulle, for the evening, and put on her pearls, with Anne doing sentry go at the door.

"He's coming!" hissed Anne.

Kitty streaked across to the lift and hugged the bell.

Captain Stirling, superb in evening clothes, had stopped to lock his door. He was committed to the lift, by a long leg, before he could consider the stairs. He brought up stiffly behind a milk-white back, shadowed by filmy black, which breathed the sickening smell of violets.

It was still as the surface of a frozen stream, masking a bright commotion.

Miss Conquest's virgin heart was thumping agreeably against her thin young ribs. The lift wouldn't come up until somebody rang the bell. She had invented this delightful opportunity. It was working like a charm. The great thing, now, was how to make the best of it.

Little audacities chased one another about, like a swarm of gnats, inside her sleek black head. Widows could do anything! Wait just a minute, though! See if he'll speak first!

She quivered and thrilled with expectancy. Her excitement charged the air about them mysteriously. Disturbing waves swept over the exasperated nerves of the man behind her. His skin pricked and his ears buzzed.

Captain Stirling had immediately recognized the girl whom he had nearly knocked down in the foyer, and to whom he had tied himself on like a luggage label. Silly ass! He stood, blaspheming the lift, and wishing she would stand off an inch from the bell, so that he could punch the button. Why the blazes didn't she do it herself?

Miss Conquest sighed patiently.

Gault's startled eyes fled to the brazen grille—high up, near the ceiling. He felt them dragged down to her head, which lifted like a black tulip on a long, pale stalk. He jerked them away, and caught them sliding down a smooth, white line into a mist of black. Staring down a girl's back? Bounder! But he *wasn't!* He coughed an outraged denial, and made a row like an exploding shell.

Miss Conquest turned a hopeful profile and thoughtlessly exposed the bell.

"Permit me!" barked hoarsely past her ear, as Gault bayoneted the inoffensive button.

The lift came up like a jack-in-the-box. Miss Conquest stepped discontentedly into it. She offered an encouraging smile to a scowl reflected in the mirror, and it was instantly taken away from her. She lingered invitingly as she stepped out into the foyer, but the tall, dark man went by like a bullet.

Halfway across the foyer, Captain Stirling was held up by a page with a wireless.

STIRLING, Splennice:
Jim in London. CARTER.

Captain Stirling's dark and thunderous brow brightened. He'd be out of this hole first thing in the morning!

V

PATTY GUNTHER-GRAY spoke to Kitty at the restaurant door.

"Oh, you're losing your pearls," she said, and caught them as they slipped down Kitty's shoulder. "What gorgeous ones!" she added, frank and friendly, as she gave them back.

Mrs. Gunther-Gray's much-traveled eyes took a short trip over the tall girl in the exquisite black. She smiled, frank and friendly as Patty.

"Are you alone to-night—Lady Mallory, isn't it? I saw the register."

"*Mrs.* Mallory," said Kitty, waving the Dubarry. "Lady Mallory's had to go to bed with a chill."

"Why, you're American, aren't you? Come under the flag! That's our table, in the corner. We're Grays—Gunther-Grays—Betty, Patty."

The friendly Gunther-Grays were popular. There was an agreeable flurry of people coming and going around the table in the corner. Two young English officers brought over their coffee and cigarettes, their cool, seen-it-all manners, and their easy, hang-it-all, slang-it-all talk.

The Gunther-Gray girls handed it back to them smartly. The vamp straight from school was dazzled by their brilliance. The gray eyes blazed. They nearly wept when these exciting creatures included her in gay plans for the evening.

"You'll come over with us to the Casino, won't you, Mrs. Mallory? We'll find you a partner."

"I'll lend you this pounder!"

Patty rapped her young officer over the knuckles. He caught her hand and coolly kept it. Wonderful life!

"Are you expecting your husband to join you, Mrs. Mallory?" inquired Mrs. Gunther-Gray, breaking into it like a bomb.

Kitty saw the kind, inquisitive face swelling to monstrous size—great eyes seeing secrets—long teeth tearing up lies.

"He—isn't—living," she got out faintly, and drank all the water out of somebody's glass.

Mrs. Gunther-Gray made vague, sympathetic sounds. They were all getting up from the table. Kitty fled for her wrap. She stopped to tap at Alma's door.

"Sleeping like a baby," said Anne, putting her nose out.

Mrs. Mallory, tall, slender, lovely, distinguished, with a tailless ermine, lined with black — a fortune in fur — sweeping her heels, was smartly raked by lorgnettes as she made her way across the foyer to the Gunther-Grays. They were talking — oh, joy!—to the tall, dark man.

"May I?" whispered Mrs. Gunther-Gray. As Kitty raised the eyes of the *belle amoureuse*, she went on: "Mrs. Mallory, may I present Captain Stirling? You're coming over, of course," she added, coolly annexing him.

She led him along, sulky and unresisting as a bear on a chain. The Gunther-Gray girls followed, sandwiching Kitty and snickering across her.

"Secret sorrow!" said one of them. "Mother kids herself she comforts him. He hates it, really."

"It isn't sorrow, Patty—it's temper. I tried the comforting, and nearly lost an ear." The three giggled wildly. "You try, Mrs. Mallory."

"I'd love it!"

At the Casino, the managing Mrs. Gunther-Gray nailed Captain Stirling to a bench and hammered him down.

"Find somebody for Mrs. Mallory, children. Captain Stirling doesn't dance. He'll talk to me."

"We're trying to get the count for Mrs. Mallory, mother," said Betty. "Count d'Auvray, Mrs. Mallory. He dances like an angel. If he isn't booked—"

"They've got him, Bets!" cried Patty, as the two young officers led in the captive Frenchman. "We'll all go in to the holy now. Got your purse handy, Mrs. Mallory? It's another ten francs. Give us the money, mother—we're going into the holy. Give your fur to Captain Stirling, Mrs. Mallory."

A swift introduction crossed. Kitty gave herself to the count, who danced like an angel, and her wrap to Captain Stirling, who didn't dance.

Left standing like a confounded footman, reflected the captain, with a fur on his arm—left to Mrs. Gunther-Gray! Couple of old women gabbling on a bench!

He laid the fur on the back of the bench.

"If you will excuse me—"

Mrs. Gunther-Gray comfortably made room for him beside her. She was saying something. He had lost half of it.

"And so very young to be a widow," she finished.

He sat down.

"Got over it, I guess—dancing, I mean, and such very light mourning!" She stroked the ermine affectionately. "Money, I imagine. Those pearls are perfect. Sure to marry again soon. The count—did you notice him? Frenchmen are so—"

Oh, he couldn't stand it!

"If you will excuse me—"

He got up. Mrs. Gunther-Gray was not looking at him.

"Why, they're all coming back!" she exclaimed.

"Horrid in there to-night," said Betty, fox-trotting up to them; "and the count's engaged for the next two. What a pity you don't dance, Captain Stirling!"

The count was desolated. He looked wanly into Mrs. Mallory's disturbing eyes. He had a friend—if he might have the honor? He tore his eyes away.

"It's that awful Norman of his that he's gone for!" cried Patty, clutching Kitty's arm. "He's a regular steam roller. *Don't*, Mrs. Mallory! He'll assassinate you."

Kitty whirled on Gault.

"Ask me to dance, Captain Stirling, quick!" She slipped lithely into the curve of his arm. "Just till he's gone. Come on—pretend!"

VI

GAULT's arm slipped limply down Kitty's back. He stood stock still. Patty Gunther-Gray tittered. Imps in her eyes mocked him. Imps in his ears mocked him. "Captain Stirling doesn't dance." "Pity you don't dance." "Come on—pretend!"

The count appeared, towing the assassin across the room, their two pairs of amorous French eyes hurrying ahead of them.

Something ran over Gault like flame. Like flame, it licked up in a fiery breath what nature made and the years had built upon. It shriveled his self-consciousness. It burned up the dry husk of his shyness.

Something fluttered in the hot dust and sprang up, ardent, hungry for the sweets and the rights of youth. To blazes with giggling girls and gabbling old women! To blazes with Frenchmen who were so—

He clasped Kitty strongly, caught her hand, and swung her out on the floor.

Gault was born with rhythm in his feet. As a boy, his tyrannical old mother had whipped him into shape. His eager young sister had pulled him about lately in the new steps. He knew perfectly what he was doing. He moved with the singular lightness of most huge creatures, with the easy power of steel-sprung muscles. He was reckless with angry excitement. The girl in his arms went down the room like the leaf on the gale.

"Oh, you do—" breathed Kitty, rapturously kicking up his step.

"I didn't say I didn't," he replied, bold as brass.

"I—know!" sighed Kitty, clinging. "Oh, lovely!"

Gault gave a breathy laugh. His sporting blood was up. He could see them all staring, Patty Gunther-Gray with her mouth open. He let himself go.

When the dam breaks, the waters go out in a flood. Gault floated out on a broad flood of light, perfume, music, rhythmic motion, warm contact, and mastery of a smooth step mated wordlessly to his. Waters swift, strange, tumultuous, bore him on, swirling him to the end of the number—into the encore—into the next, a waltz—into another giddy one-step. They were carrying a girl along with him, and both dancers were thrilling to it.

The jazz band blared, crashed, exploded. The tango band started with a whisper of strings.

"Tired?"

"No."

"Tango?"

"Yes."

The whispering strings thrummed a vamp, caught up a tremendous barytone voice, and carried it out on the voluptuous measure. Young bodies shivered together, drifted apart, clung, rocked, dipped, lifted, clung again. Young breath came quick, warm, happy.

The glowing notes throbbed, swooned, thrilled with fire and sensuous sweetness. The pulse of southern France beat in the room. Hot color—hot skies—hot blood!

The rich clamor mounted to Gault's brain and called to something sound asleep there to wake up, wake up, and be young! He took all this clinging softness more closely in his arms. He felt the heartbeat in it, and his own heart leaping.

The warm voice sang:

"Tes yeux, deux é-toi-les, é-toi-les,
É-toi-les d'a-mour!"

Kitty looked up into Gault's eyes.

"We're just wonderful together, aren't we?" she breathed.

"Dont les rayons dé-voi-lent, dé-voi-lent,
Dévoilent une â-me pure."

"You're wonderful!" he said dizzily, the words reeling out of him.

"Ta bou-che une ro-se, une ro-se,
Ro-se en-chan-tée."

"Oh, you are, too," laughed Kitty happily. "I could go on with you forever!"

"Dont les pé-tales dé-clo-ses, dé-clo-ses,
Ré-vé-lent un baiser."

"Could you?" asked Gault, his head beginning to go around. "Would you"—his head going around faster—"if I asked you to?" Around and around, faster and faster! "If I asked you to go on with me?" Faster—getting away—stars—roses—sweetness—singing — ringing — clinging—gladness — madness! "Will you? I want you to!"

Holding to each other—two children in a new, wonderful place—startled, listening! They heard the voice of southern France calling to youth. They felt the pulse of southern France beating up to heaven.

"Why, Captain Stirling!" Earth! People! It was Mrs. Gunther-Gray, kind and inquisitive. "Well, I never!"

"You're a shy young daisy! Waited to be picked!" said Patty, impudent.

"May I have the pleasure of the next?" asked Betty, mincing.

"Topping twist, that last you were showing!" observed her young officer.

The count looked reproachfully at Mrs. Mallory.

Mrs. Mallory began laughing. She laughed, and laughed, and couldn't stop. All about nothing! She was wild with excitement, wild with young life, wild with young love—just wild!

Gault watched her, and went white.

"Thank you, Mrs. Mallory," he said slowly. "That was delightful!"

He bowed, and got away. Kitty went on laughing. They all joined in. Laughter ran out of the room after Gault, ran along beside him under the stars, scorched his pride, scourged his young passion, and smothered him in self-consciousness.

They were laughing at him for a silly ass. He deserved it, coming out with a raw thing like that to a strange girl! A girl? No—a widow. She knew what she was about. Probably she meant to make a fool of him. She was laughing about it now, with the rest of them. God!

He fled, miserably, into the night.

VII

THE psychology of Captain Stirling's hot love-making and cold leave-taking presented a blank wall to a widow who didn't know what she was about.

Miss Conquest was youthfully unaware that her beauty, dressed in the magic of the hour, had stirred a man's sleeping senses. She equally failed to understand that her helpless laughter had flayed young love alive.

In the tall, dark magnificence hitched to her by the captain's coat button, in the hotel lobby, she had realized the ideal of blameless schoolgirl dreams. She had got out her heart ready to hand to him on the spot. She had accepted his raw, as he offered it. She expected to be engaged to him the next day, and would doubtless have married him the day after. When he abruptly took himself off immediately after his thrilling remarks, she childishly wondered why.

In the early, pearly morning of the Côte d'Azur, Miss Conquest stepped out on her balcony, saw the captain on the path below, among the wanton roses, and prepared to give him gay greeting. She tied her handkerchief into a ball, sent it whizzing over the great glass eyelid of the terrace, and dropped it smartly at his feet.

Captain Stirling looked up, flushed hotly, bowed coldly, picked up the handkerchief, and stalked under the eyelid.

Miss Conquest was roused from stupor by a knock at her door. She turned into the room.

"*Entrez!*"

A page served up her handkerchief neatly on a salver.

"*Le capitaine Anglais, madame.*"

Kitty couldn't have looked more horrified at John the Baptist's head.

"*Merci,*" she said faintly.

What was the matter with him?

The matter with the Earl of Gault was tremendous. Love had pounced on him out of a girl's gray eyes, and he couldn't get away. Grown in an hour, it was bigger than himself. Knocked on the head at birth, it lived to tear him to bits. He believed he had made a fool of himself. He was ashamed to go on with it, but he couldn't leave off.

He remained at Nice. He followed Mrs. Mallory about, and kept the room between them. He treated her with chill politeness, and loved her with consuming fires. He was as transparent as a pane of glass. He couldn't keep mad love out of his eyes, or mad hate, either.

Count d'Auvray also flaunted an arrow-pierced heart on his cuff. He also followed "*Mme. Mal'ree*" about, as close as he could get to her. The young Frenchman returned Captain Stirling's murderous glances murderously. The pair met and circled stiffly, showing their teeth, ready to fly at each other's throat.

Miss Conquest simply breathed it in. Here was her magnificence in the love sulks about her. Here was the count crazy about her. Life was one exciting love affair!

She would have liked it better if Captain Stirling had raved and the count had sulked; but love was at her heels, and she kicked them up, gayly, over these pastures new.

Mrs. Mallory was indeed making a sensation on the Riviera. Mayol's "big noise" was heard all over Nice. It began to take on an ominous sound. The society clothes peg was not in society. The ducal chaperon was still in bed. The Mayol costumes were cheeky stuff.

The young widow, having topping fun every minute, wore her vampish weeds with her manikin manners. Even without the purple mouth and the saucers of soot, she looked extremely like what she was not. As the duchess had foretold, she had every man in Nice tearing after her. She had no idea where she was going, but she was going there at a spanking trot.

Eyebrows began to go up, thumbs down. Who was the Mrs. Mallory in the expensive clothes? Who was the Lady Mallory she mysteriously kept under the bed? Who was the Mr. Mallory she had so blithely buried? Was there ever a Mr. Mallory?

"How did you lose your husband, dear?" Mrs. Gunther-Gray, kind and inquisitive, persisted in asking.

"I—" stammered Kitty, "I—can't bear to talk about it!"

Everybody else could, however.

Gault, glooming over a solitary pipe in the palm court, one evening, was joined by the fat man with the disgusting wink.

"How's things?" inquired the unwelcome person, making himself comfortable under the same palm. "Naughty widow's all in white this evening, I see. Some kind of story about her, ain't there? Got the hang of it?"

Captain Stirling's savage silence indicated that he had not.

"Husband run away or something, ain't it?" He stopped to bite off a cigar. "Damned if I would! Peaches—what?"

Gault banged out his pipe and made a movement to get up.

"Got a match, old man? Thanks!" said the fat man, taking the case. "T'other way around, probably. Looks swift—what d'ye think?"

"I'm afraid I don't know what you're referring to," replied Gault icily.

"Go on!" scoffed the other. "Saw you dancing together!"

Gault put out a trembling hand for his match case. The fat man let a match go out.

"Little black-haired devil—dresses like a cocotte." He lighted up. "Leading Count What's-His-Name around by the nose, ain't she? I'd like to get to the bottom of the husband story!"

"Oh, let's hope the poor devil's dead!" Gault burst out furiously.

There was a stir of palm leaves behind them, as Mrs. Mallory walked around from the other side of the big basin. Both men bounded up as if shot by the same spring. Kitty's shamed eyes flickered over Gault's horrified face. He made a quick, protective movement toward her, and her glance narrowed. Two stabbing steel points cut him dead.

The fat man obeyed an insane impulse to rush out of the room after her. Gault's six feet three collapsed in disjointed sections upon the bench, and he covered his face with his hands.

VIII

Miss Conquest, kneeling beside the duchess's bed, was weeping for sympathy and not getting it.

"You can't care for a common man like that! Talking about women—" said Alma scathingly.

"He isn't. We didn't. I do. It was the other one. He does for me, too. We both cared right off!"

"Piffle! You don't know the man. I never heard of any Captain Stirling. What's he captain of?"

"I don't care if it's a coal barge, I tell you. I love him! I made him jealous—that's why he went off that first night; and since then he's heard things—lies! Oh, can't you see how awful it is? I can't tell the truth without making it worse! I can't say, now, that I'm not a widow, and never had a husband—that I'm a shop girl paid to dress like—I didn't know I looked like—oh, he thinks I'm *bad!*"

She flung herself on Alma and burst into frantic crying.

"Hush!" said the duchess, holding her. "This is half my fault. I ought never to have allowed it. You would do it, Kitty; and I thought I'd be around, and could take care of you. I can't do anything over here. It would only stir up a lot more talk. Listen! We'll go away at once."

"I *can't* go away! I've got to—"

The duchess shook her.

"Are you thinking about Mayol? Haven't you had enough Mayol? You'll do as I say, now. I'm going to look out for you—Roth and I. Stop crying! I want you to listen to me. I'm going to help you. Nobody's going to think anything wrong about you, Kitty. I'll take you back to Mount Street. Roth will be in London on Saturday, and I'll wireless him to meet us there. If this Captain Stirling of yours is anybody, Roth will get hold of him and bring him to see me. I'll have a talk with him. Then, if you care so much for him, and he's serious—"

Miss Conquest fell, stiflingly, on her deliverer.

"There!" said the duchess, emerging whole. "Hop off and pack. Call Anne. Kiss me. Night!"

"Um—um—um! *Angel!* I don't want Anne."

In an airy flight to her room, Kitty was shot in the wing by an English page standing at Captain Stirling's open door.

"Very good, sir," the page was saying. "Early call—first-class to Paris, sir." A brown hand shot out, a clink of coin passed. "Thank you, sir!"

The door closed. The boy ran down the stairs.

Paris! Not London, where Rothair could get hold of him, and Alma have a talk with him! Going away early to Paris!

Kitty let herself blindly into her room. She began feverishly to take her clothes—hateful clothes, like a cocotte's—from wardrobes and drawers, and to fold them into her boxes, wondering, all the while, why she was doing it. She went on with it, leaving out clothes to travel in, packing her evening frock, and slipping into a loose white gown and mules. Then she pulled the combs from her hair, and threw herself on the long chair by the open window.

The moon, sailing high above this world of woe, looked coldly down on the great love affair.

Grunch, grunch, grunch, grunch, on the gravel path under the balcony.

Kitty stole out. There he was—pacing up and down with long, uneasy strides. The night was so moon bright that she could see the trouble on his face, and so still that he could have heard her whisper.

Ah, me! You can't whisper, by moonlight, to a man you have just cut dead. If you hadn't cut him, perhaps he wouldn't be going away. If you could see him again—accidentally, of course—and give him another chance to speak, perhaps he wouldn't go away.

Miss Conquest flitted back into her room, to dress for an accidental meeting with Captain Stirling. She kicked off one mule.

"He-he-he!" tittered the pert French clock on the mantel, pointing its fingers, sticking them right through this splendid plan.

Put on your mule again, Mrs. Mallory! You can't be casually meandering about the Hôtel Splendide at three o'clock in the morning!

At seven o'clock in the morning Captain Stirling will take the train for Paris. You'll never see him again. All your own fault! What did you want to cut him dead for? Why did you drive him away?

Kitty leaned, disconsolate, against the window, listening to the step on the gravel, staring at a silly French picture on the wall, over the cynical little French clock. Her eyes began to ache on a blur of black letters in a blaze of gilt.

Subconsciously she separated them, and their meaning floated to the surface of her mind. "*La Somnambule*" was the title of the silly French picture. It showed a girl in white walking, in her sleep, down a long hall, and a dark man watching her from the shadow of a doorway.

The figures leaped from the canvas, alive. They held a torch to Miss Conquest's thoughts, sent out hot sparks, and started a roaring bonfire in her head. The hall of the Hôtel Splendide—Mrs. Mallory walking in her sleep—Captain Stirling going to his room—all burning together crazily!

The blind alcove near the stairs, hidden from the lift, where she could wait for him, caught and blazed. The lift went up in smoke. Paris was destroyed. Alma's offer to explain rose like a phœnix from the flames. Then the step on the gravel abruptly ceased, and the world took fire.

Mad as a March hare hounded by a pack of beagles, Miss Conquest scampered out into the hall and shut her door behind her. She leaned against it, panting.

Across the hall, Captain Stirling's door stood wide open, and Kitty could see all over an empty moonlit room. There wasn't a soul about. There was no sign of the lift coming up. There was plenty of time. Her heart fluttering like a wild bird trapped in her throat, she crept across the hall.

A quick step came leaping up the stairs. Her nerves snapped. Her plan was shattered. The hall rocked. The lights blinded her. The floor rose and sank. She shut her eyes and flung out her hands in stupid fright, standing halfway across the hall in the pose of the girl in the picture.

Some mysterious force of suggestion worked subtly in her empty brain, and drove her on. She moved uncertainly, in a broken line, toward Captain Stirling's open door.

Gault came straight on her from the stairs. He took root in a stride, his scalp rising. What? Who?

Merciful heavens, *Mrs. Mallory!* She was walking in her sleep—walking straight into his room!

He started impetuously toward her. Something cold, spectral, glided between them, and sent him back shuddering against the hall. God, that was a near thing! A sleepwalker suddenly awakened — he had often heard that the shock meant death.

He shook off his horror. He must get her safe out of this. With all this talk about her in the hotel, it would be—

Click! Whir-r-r-r! Light shot up the shaft. Men's voices — laughter from the rising lift.

Gault swooped, snatched Mrs. Mallory up in his arms, like a bundle of hay, plunged into his room, and kicked the door shut. It banged with a noise to wake the seven sleepers, but Mrs. Mallory slept on, her face as white as chalk against his black sleeve, in the bright light of the moon.

He laid her on the couch, and looked, with a strange coldness, to see what he had done to her. He had made a grim choice in that fraction of a second after he had heard the lift.

When he felt her pulse stir under his fingers, all his cold nerve went out of him. He dropped weakly to his knees beside the couch, and, believing her sound asleep, left Miss Conquest's healthy young heart to its business of pulling her out of a dead faint.

Captain Stirling's step on the stairs had shocked all thought of the lift out of Kitty's head. Its warning click and whir sounded in her ear as alarmingly as the rattle of a rattlesnake.

In one of those vivid flashes that come like the headlights of imminent and deadly danger, she saw herself, in her careless white, her hanging hair, her bare feet in mules, alone with Captain Stirling, at three o'clock in the morning, at the open door of his unlighted room, in a hotel already whispering with her name. She realized she had not an earthly chance to escape without being seen from the lift. Then the dreadful lights went out on a black world. If Gault had not caught her up, she would have gone in a heap in the hall.

She opened dazed eyes on an unfamiliar room. She saw Captain Stirling kneeling beside her, and painfully recollected everything—except how she came to be in here, alone, with him.

Gault spoke gently.

"It's all right, Mrs. Mallory. You're just waking up. You're with me for a minute."

"How — how — I didn't mean—" she stammered.

She looked at him wildly and burst into tears.

"Mrs. Mallory, it's all right. You were walking in your sleep. I had to carry—don't, darling! The lift—oh, darling, don't cry! I can't stand seeing you cry. I love you, Kitty! I'd die, or do anything. I couldn't have you seen—oh, for God's sake, don't cry like that! I love you so much, darling!"

"Don't! You mustn't! I'm ashamed!" she cried, sobbing out just what was in her head. "I didn't mean — you make me ashamed. I want—"

She got dizzily to her feet, and wavered toward the door.

Gault made it before her, and stood with his back against it.

"I'm a beast to say that to you now. Stand against the wall, and let me see if it's clear outside. I'll take you to your room. I just want you to know that nobody saw you."

He put his hand on the knob, and turned back to her.

"May I say something first, Mrs. Mallory? I'm going early in the morning. Will you let me see you again in London? Is it any use?"

"Any use?" repeated Kitty, looking at him vaguely through her tears.

"I mean, trying to see you and telling you about myself? I want to marry you, if you'll have me. I'm not asking that now—only if I can see you in London, or wherever you live. I thought—at first—when we were dancing—I meant what I said. I thought, then, you didn't mind."

"Oh, I didn't," faltered Kitty, trembling toward him. "I wanted to go on, too!"

"Then will you write the address and send it across from your room? I'll scout now."

He opened the door and looked out.

"All clear! Slip over quickly!"

Miss Conquest, trembling with eagerness, wrote the address, "16 Mount Street, London, W.," and under it "Come Saturday, five o'clock, to Kitty," on one of the hotel cards. She kissed the fateful screed, slipped it into an envelope, sent it across the hall, and gave herself to tears. A few honest, stinging drops of shame fell in the shower of joy and thankfulness at her escape.

"Anyway, it was a real faint," she informed her blushing conscience. "I had to do something to make him understand!"

IX

The Earl of Gault was about as far from understanding as he could get in a thousand years when he saw his own address grinning at him from Mrs. Mallory's card.

> No. 16 Mount Street, London, W. Come Saturday, five o'clock, to Kitty.

There it was, as clear as mud. Mrs. Mallory invited him to call on her, on Saturday afternoon, at his own address—at 16 Mount Street, London, W.

The house consisted of bachelor chambers. There wasn't a woman, except old Nanny, under the roof. There were only two tenants besides himself—two chaps he knew well, and they hadn't a woman relative between 'em. They were chaps who never entertained women, either of 'em.

His thoughts clung to these two men as fondly as a plaster. They were getting on in years. They were rather crusty, and made a fuss when the house was upset. They didn't like workmen about. They might not have liked—Gault had thought of it at the time—having Jim's wife come there.

A fiend of a thought clubbed him on the head, crashed him down on a chair, and started strangling him. He beat it off. Impossible! Preposterous!

It came back at him. Was it so impossible? Put two and two together. See what you get!

He got forty.

"She's French."

He thought of Mrs. Mallory's perfect French, and her appearance.

"She dresses like a cocotte."

Oh, God!

Hold on! Don't be an ass! Jim's wife's in London. Old Romney Carter's cable—what was it, now? "Jim in London." Jim in London—not Jim and wife! Jim had been sent off to London in a hurry, and had had no time to pick up his wife at Nice. *Nice*—that's where Jim's wife was. *Mrs. Mallory*—that's who Jim's wife was. Oh, my God!

Hold on! Keep cool! Think it out! Why should she give herself away? Why should she give the Mount Street address?

Why not? She was going to have the laugh out. She would introduce her husband. Jim—he would see Jim! A woman like that in the family! A woman who was "leading Count What's-His-Name around by the nose!"

"Come Saturday, five o'clock, to Kitty." He smashed his fist into it. He saw her face—tearful, tender. His passion for her seared him—a thing alive, white-hot—and went down, hissing, into a chill flood of scorn. A cocotte? Worse!

In his crazed certainty, he never thought to inquire on what date Mrs. Mallory had arrived at the Splendide, or even if the Hon. Mrs. Alburton had left Nice. When he rang his bell, it was to say to a page, appalled by the ferocity of his eyes:

"Tell 'em below to cancel Paris. I'm flying to England. Get a wire phoned to fix up a passage, and have my stuff expressed to Victoria."

The duchess, lightly attired in beneaths, was transferring crested things from her dressing table to her dressing bag, the next morning, when Miss Conquest fluttered in.

"I've seen him!" Kitty cried ecstatically.

"Captain Stirling? Just now?"

"Last night—in the hall. Alma, he has asked me to marry him!"

"In the hall?"

"There wasn't anybody else there," replied Miss Conquest naïvely.

"Do you mean to say the man cantered up to you in the hall and asked you to marry him—after you cut him?"

"I made him—I made him speak to me, I mean," replied Kitty, as the duchess stopped to stare with her head half through her *camisole*. "I heard him say he was going to Paris early, and I had to see him!"

"Did you hang about the hall to see him, at that hour—after you left me? Kitty Conquest!"

"I wouldn't do such a thing," declared Miss Conquest virtuously. "No—I walked right into him. He didn't kiss me or anything, either."

"Kitty! You haven't accepted that man, without knowing anything about him?"

"Well, he doesn't know anything about me. He's coming to Mount Street on Saturday. I thought if you'd see him first—"

"Rothair will see him first," said the duchess, coldly powdering.

"Don't! Don't spoil it for me!" cried Kitty, running to her and tweaking away the puff. "I won't let you spoil it! Alma, I'm so happy!"

"You're crazy. Give that back to me. No"—repulsing cuddly overtures—"I'm cross. I'm worried about you. All right, there!" rewarding Miss Conquest's persistence with a stingy smile.

"More light!" cried Kitty, punching a dimple. "Oh!" she went on, as the duchess lightly pushed her off. "Don't, Alma! I haven't anybody but you!"

X

In Mount Street, Mrs. Jim, who had danced all night, was sleeping into Saturday afternoon. Jim was out. Harrow was sourly dusting the desecrated sitting room, when the Duke of Rothair lifted Lord Gault's knocker with a stick held in his left hand.

The nobleman's right hand was bandaged. There was a bandage on his left leg, under a distended sock. The bridge of his nose, and both cheeks, were richly decorated with surgical plaster in a death's head design. A healed but still pouting under lip showed a ragged purple scar that streaked down his chin.

"Your grace!" gasped Harrow, falling at him through the door.

"Me all right, under the trimmings," replied the duke, mistaking the servitor's symptoms for unmixed sympathy. "Got clawed a bit. Going to keep me standing here on one pin?"

He hobbled in on his stick. Harrow feebly backed out of his way. A porter plumped a couple of suit cases down in the lobby.

"Warm, ain't it?" observed his grace, putting the bandaged leg tenderly to bed on the Chesterfield. "Brandy and soda would be a pretty good fit, Harrow. His lordship cruising?"

"Yes, your grace," replied Harrow, serving him with a shaking hand, and filling up recklessly from the syphon.

"Hold on! Don't drown it! I say, you might fix me up with a boiling hot bath, there's a good chap, and get me out a sleeping suit. Bags ain't locked. I'll have an hour's snooze before her grace gets here."

"'Er grace!" mouthed Harrow. He resorted to desperate measures. "It's most unfortunate, your grace—we 'ave the painters in. If your grace would like me to call up Claridge's?"

"Right-oh! No bath," said the duke, swallowing the painters. "Ring 'em up, and I'll toddle across when her grace comes along. Tell you what, Harrow—I'll have a shakedown on the jolly old bunk!" He thumped the Chesterfield cordially and woke up his injured leg. "Got a winder on," he said, fidgeting with it. "Get this shoe off, will you? Get 'em both off. Give me a hand here."

He stood up and held out his arm. Harrow despairingly gave him the hand, covered him up with a rug on the couch, and retired, to pray.

"If that 'ussy would only stay asleep! If Mr. Jim would only come 'ome!"

The hussy slept until, toward the end of his hour's snooze, the Duke of Rothair fought his tiger over again. A couple of strangled hoots and a hoarse "In the eye, you damned shirkers! Look out there!" brought Mrs. Jim up from her bed, trembling with terror.

"Jeem! Jeem!" piped the infant. "Oh, *mon Dieu!* Jee-eem!"

"Having the nightmare," muttered his grace sleepily.

He rolled over on the leg with the winder on, and cut off his yawn with a sounding curse. A shrill treble answered piercingly through the bedroom door:

"Jeem! *Qu'est-ce qu'il y a? J'ai peur!*"

"What the blazes?"

The duke spiraled up on his good elbow and lifted his legs off the couch. His mahogany colored face, with startled eyes bulging between the death's head plasters, was turned full on the bedroom door.

The door opened, and "the painters," in white satin pyjamas, fluttered out to him on little bare feet.

"*Mais* Jeem! Ah! Ah! A-a-a-ah!"

The horrifying apparition towered up from the couch, and hobbled at her with intent to soothe. Deuced young and pretty, whoever she was, and scared out of her little wits!

"S-s-s-sh!" said his grace, pouting the scarred under lip pleasingly. "*S-s-s-sh!*"

Mrs. Jim feebly beat the air.

"Ol' man! Ol' man! Que-e-ek!"

The door to the lobby opened, and the Duchess of Rothair stood in the doorway. Behind her, Harrow leaned, witless, against a wall.

"Roth, dearest!"

The duchess hurried toward her mutilated husband in alarm—and stopped. Her face swiftly recorded emotions tumbling over one another like the bits of glass in a kaleidoscope. She took in the rumpled couch, her husband's disarray, and the cowering figure of Mrs. Jim, barefooted, in the white satin pyjamas. She sucked in her breath with a long, fierce hiss, and turned on Harrow.

"When my luggage arrives, send it on at once to Claridge's," she ordered, and was gone.

Rothair fell, frenzied and speechless, on his coat and shoes. Fiercely repulsing Harrow, he dragged them on, jammed his hat down, and pounded after his wife.

"Who zose averybodies, ol' man?" inquired Mrs. Jim, who was getting on with her English.

Receiving no response, she retired, bemused, to her bedroom, and nervously locked herself in to wait for "Jeem."

XI

Kitty had parted from Alma at Victoria, and had gone, with Anne, to Mayol's, to change into clothes that did not look like a cocotte's. She was too happy to care what Mayol thought about it.

"They're in Paris, the pair of 'em," Anne informed her, after reconnoitering on her own account. She helped Kitty dress.

"He'll eat you sure, Miss Kitty," she said encouragingly, as Miss Conquest hopped off to her love affair.

Lord Gault reached Mount Street before her.

"Oh, m'lord, m'lord!" sobbed Harrow.

"Where's my brother?" demanded Gault, stepping over him.

"Hout, m'lord."

"Where's the lady?"

So he knew!

"She's 'ere, m'lord," replied Harrow.

Gault seized him by the collar.

"When she comes into the room, you're not to know me. I'm Captain Stirling. Do you understand? I'm Captain Stirling, calling to see the lady. Got it?"

"Yes, m'lord."

"Say 'sir,' you ass!"

"S-sir, m'lord."

"Get out! I'll wait for her in here. Stay out!"

Gault shook him into the lobby, and banged the door.

From the mantel, the photos of Jim and Kitty, side by side, met the fierce look in his lordship's eye with smiling unconcern. Proof? Surely—if he needed any!

He turned, tortured, from Kitty's wistful eyes, and sat heavily on the couch, planning his bitter revenge. This was his hour. He wanted only five minutes of it — five minutes to tell her that he was Jim's brother. He would show her no mercy. Five ice-cold minutes!

"Is Captain Stirling with her grace?" asked Kitty, at the door.

"'Er grace 'as—'as stepped out, miss," answered Harrow nervously. "'Is lord—the capting's 'ere."

Kitty slipped off her hat and furs and went in to him shyly.

Gault got up, trembling with fury and other feelings at the sight of her.

"Good afternoon, Mrs.—shall I say—*Mallory!*"

"Why—why—"

"I'm fortunate in being allowed to see you for a moment alone," Gault went on, trying to sneer coldly, and making a terrible hash of it. "You're standing."

He pushed a chair toward her, and seated himself again as she sank into it.

"Oh, you're angry with me!" said Kitty childishly, her chin beginning to quiver.

"No—not angry. I'm amused about—about *Mr. Mallory,*" he returned, fighting hard for the sneer. "You thought, perhaps, that I—"

"Oh, I thought you'd forgive me!" cried Kitty, the tears coming with a rush. "You said you—you loved me, and—"

"My God!" Gault bounded from his chair, upsetting his ice wagon. "Don't drag that in! I believed in you," he went on passionately, forgetting everything, for a moment, but his own suffering. "I thought, when I was talking that — that rot—"

"Oh!"

"I thought you were what you said you were. I meant it—you knew that! You knew what you were about. I had never cared for a woman." He stopped, scorning himself. "I'm not here to whine about my part of it. I've got something to tell you." He towered over her chair. "You weren't satisfied to amuse yourself with that crowd over there"—he was black with fury — "with leading Count What's-His-Name around by the nose. You wanted to make a fool of me, and you—"

"I didn't! I didn't! I meant it, too! I cared for you, too! I've never cared for anybody else, either!"

Gault made a gesture of loathing.

"You're shameless," he said harshly.

Kitty sprang to her feet, her face suddenly flaming.

"Don't — you — think — you'd—better —go—now?" she said, slicing off each word with a sharp breath. "Don't—you—think —you've—said—enough?" She stopped to get her voice steadier. "This isn't my house, but you wouldn't be allowed to talk to me like this, here. Please go away before my—"

Gault laughed insolently.

"If you don't mind, I think I'll wait and see him!"

He turned and coolly strolled across the room. Kitty stared blankly at his back. She opened her lips, shut them again, and moved quickly to the bedroom door. It was locked.

"My brother? Topping!"

It was Jim's gay voice in the lobby.

Miss Conquest sped past Gault to the oriel window. He smothered an ugly word as she slipped behind the heavy tapestry hangings.

Simultaneously Jim burst into the room.

"Well, you old blighter? Come spying, what? Where is she? Bet you've scared her off with the old Ollendorf! She's shy as a—hullo, Ally! Hullo, old sport! Where did you get the Ku Klux face?"

The Duke and Duchess of Rothair, reconciled, and extremely dignified, had entered behind him.

"'Lo," said his grace uncomfortably.

"Aft'noon," said the duchess, freezing both her brothers with a glacial stare. "We've only called on Miss Conquest's account. She arranged to meet a friend here. We—"

"What's up with you two?" Jim broke in, looking angrily from one to the other of the dear old relatives. "You're a damned pleasant-looking lot, all of you!" He raked his brother's grim face suspiciously. "You've told 'em, you rotter! Beastly of you, setting 'em on! Why couldn't you do as I—oh, all right! We'll get out of here!"

He dashed for the bedroom door. It was locked.

"*Yette! Chérie!*" The dove's note fluting absurdly out of the lion's roar. "*Ouvres, ouvres donc, mimi! C'est moi, Jim!*"

Confused little sounds of gladness came from behind the door. Three faces turned toward it—three grotesques hung in a row—three witless, stupefied masks, gaping.

The door opened, and cast Mrs. Jim's honey-colored, bobbed head and flying pyjamas into Jim's large embrace.

"There she is!" he said defiantly, turning on them with his bride sitting on his arm, like a lovely boy doll, her small legs dangling. "What's the matter with her? What you making a fuss about? Look at her!"

He put her down on her bare feet in front of them, tilting up her chin with one big finger.

"*Fais la belle, toi,*" he said, with that ridiculous change in his voice. "*Dis 'Bon jour, la famille!'*"

Mrs. Jim, in a terrible pink to-do over the pyjamas, rubbed her white satin knees together, like a fly, and curled up her embarrassed toes in shy silence.

"Who is she?" asked Alma foolishly.

"My wife—that's who she is!" said Jim, snatching her up, and looking poisonously over her head at his sister. "You didn't have time to ask who she was when you saw her on your way to Nice—you and your smart friend, Miss Kitty Conquest! I'd like to see you two down on your knees to her!"

"Jimmy!"

The duchess took a step toward him. She was seized by the shoulders and whirled about, to face her raving elder brother.

"*You?* You and *who? When?* When were you — where did you — were *you*— Why don't you answer, Ally? Why don't you speak?"

"Easy on!" interposed Rothair, pulling Gault off with the good arm.

The duchess could hold her own unaided.

"Answer? Answer a machine gun firing down my throat? Are you saying a grammar lesson? Who — when—where—why? What do you want to know?"

"Nothing!"

"Well, go and ask somebody else. I'm trying to kiss Jim's wife. Come and love her, Roth!"

She pulled her husband over to Mrs. Jim, who received the death's head doubtfully. The duchess put an arm around her, and then it slipped up to Jim's neck.

"Sorry, old boy!" she said.

"All right, old lady."

Gault, gripping the back of a chair with hands that showed white at every knuckle, gave a sudden twist of his wrists that bowled it across the room.

"Introduce me," he said, bowing before Mrs. Jim. "So *you're* Jim's wife!"

He nearly wrenched Jim's hand off, and turned excitedly on his sister.

"I say, you'd better patch it up with Miss Conquest, hadn't you? Keeping her waiting with her friend in the dining room—"

"Oh!" cried Alma guiltily.

"Hold on! Harrow!"—as a face dazzled in from the lobby. "Get some wine up. Come on, all of us!"

They followed him trustfully to the door behind the Chesterfield. Gault opened it with a flourish, and saw them all through it. Then he shut and locked it. He locked the door to the lobby, leaped for the oriel window, and vanished.

Subsequent remarks — heavily upholstered in tapestry:

"If you ever could, darling—know I don't—shooting too good—if you only will, Kitty—don't deserve—silly ass!"

THE END

The Token

THE STORY OF A STRANGE INTERNATIONAL CONSPIRACY

By Louis Tracy

Author of "The Wings of the Morning," "The House of Peril," etc.

SO recently as a day in June, 1922, the Hon. Peggy Mainwaring — if acquainted with the noble barony of Copmanthorpe, you pronounce the family surname as if it were spelled "Mannering" —found herself alone in her father's Mayfair residence, and wondered idly, during breakfast, how best she could use many hours of sunshine freed by happy chance from any social engagement.

Being a bit of an artist, she had marked down at least three galleries of modern art for prolonged inspection; but it would be almost a sin to bury one's self in stuffy rooms on such a glorious day as this promised to be. There were, of course, several dozens of people whom she might ring up on the phone, and the merest hint of loneliness, even of boredom, would bring invitations to fill a whole fortnight; but for some reason, though she loved gayety, and was liked by her friends, the fashionable round made no appeal that morning.

The Hon. Peggy was not accustomed to moods of indecision. Still nibbling a piece of toast, she rose from the table, went to a window, and glued her nose to a pane of that pink-tinted glass found so rarely nowadays in London's Georgian mansions. She was young enough and pretty enough to risk this drastic treatment of her nose. The mere action bespoke a quality of girlish impulsiveness which had survived her twenty-first birthday.

She said to herself:

"It's rather a bore to have an off day and not know what to do with it. Let's see if the weather is really as fine as it looks."

The weather answered by revealing a Curzon Street shining in the sun, and a sky unflecked by any wisp of cloud.

The door of the morning room opened, and Peggy turned her head just in time to catch the eye of a maid who had peeped in and was making off again.

"Come in, Monica!" cried Miss Mainwaring. "You can clear the table. I'm going out somewhere, wherever that may be. Now, what would *you* do if you could just put on your hat and vanish till dusk?"

Monica smiled—rather wistfully, Peggy thought. The girl was not a cockney, so gave no pert answer, such as "Not my luck!" or the more plaintive "I've been too busy even to think of it."

"If I had the chance, miss," she said, "I'd take the train to Sutton, borrow my sister's bicycle, and go for a long ride over the Downs."

"By yourself?"

"Yes, miss — I like it best that way. You can go where you please, and rest when you're tired, and there's always some place where you can get a cup of tea before making for home again."

"Let me see—your people live in Sutton, don't they?"

"Yes, miss—on the Banstead Road."

"Well, everything is spick and span here. Shall I ask Mr. Hobbs to give you the day off?"

Monica blushed with joy at the mere suggestion. So Peggy interviewed a dignified butler, and placated him with the announcement that meals, other than "something on a plate" late that evening, need not disturb the domestic staff further—in so far as she was concerned—until the following morning.

In a word, Monica, by her devotion to the charms of the Surrey Downs, had not only gained unexpected freedom, but also solved the problem which perplexed her

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young mistress—for that title might reasonably be assumed by Lady Copmanthorpe's daughter during the week she was presiding over the household in Mayfair.

Within an hour, having written some letters, the Hon. Peggy had changed her clothing to a homespun skirt, a brown silk blouse, strong brown shoes and stockings, and a nondescript hat meant for golf, tennis, the sea, and the moors, and equally becoming in each of these somewhat varied conditions. She entered the Green Park near the new yet old and always beautiful hammered iron gates taken from Devonshire House, and passed a detachment of the Guards marching along the Mall from Chelsea barracks to St. James's Palace.

Although her countrified garb, on a June morning in London, amounted almost to a disguise, two officers saw her, and smiled in surprised recognition.

" Dear me! " she thought. " I had no idea men were so sharp-eyed. I didn't think a soul in town would know me in this rig. What a thing it is to have a face that is a fortune! And what will Bobby say when they tell him?"

Lord Robert Ferris, as color bearer, was compelled by the king's regulations, or some equally potent force to march with " eyes front." Yet he was the one among three who might have been expected to discover Peggy were she clothed in rags, because he was infatuated about her, and was even now raging at the ill luck which allotted him twenty-four hours of continuous duty on one of the few days Lady Copmanthorpe would be out of town during the season.

Peggy's cheeks dimpled with glee as she pictured Lord Robert's annoyance at not having shown, even by so much as a flicker of the eyelids, that he was aware of her. She was not conceited, but just happy and care-free, with the ichor of youth and good health dancing in her veins. At that moment a baby cooed at her from the depths of a perambulator, and was told forthwith that he was a darling.

Arrived at Victoria Station, she looked around casually for Monica, who was not visible, for the very good reason that the girl had flown out of the house ten minutes after Mr. Hobbs proved complaisant. Miss Mainwaring took a first-class return ticket to Sutton, and caught a train at eleven o'clock, having ascertained that an express from Portsmouth to London halted at Sutton at 5 P.M.

Her simple program was to hire a bicycle and roam the Downs for five hours. She would then be sufficiently tired to enjoy a light meal at seven, read till ten, and go early to bed—which would be quite a change from the habits and times of society in June.

In Sutton a bicycle dealer offered her a machine at ten shillings for the day, plus a deposit of one pound sterling. Peggy examined the tires, tested the handlebar, fork, and pedals, and said pleasantly:

" Suppose I pay fifteen shillings and deposit two pounds—will you then give me something on which I may possibly not break my neck?"

There was no argument. After signing a book " P. Mainwaring," she left for Banstead on a quite reliable machine, the proprietor of the shop merely remarking to an assistant:

" S'elp me! Wimmen nowadays are that independent! An' it beats me where the young uns get the money. Didjer twig the roll of notes in 'er purse?"

The assistant had twigged, and said so curtly. In his secret soul, or what served as such, he was annoyed at two things—that the " boss " had not been many miles distant when this nice girl called, and that she should have been asked to accept a worn-out bicycle.

As it happened, the Hon. Peggy had absolutely no experience of unaccompanied travel on the king's highway in the vicinity of London, so her knowledge of life as it is lived by the proletariat widened considerably during the first half hour. She discovered that a certain type of motorist gave her the glad eye in passing, that gawky youths deemed it funny to shout at her, and that a number of men on bicycles, overtaking her, were individually eager to share the road and guide her to her intended destination.

Moreover, this being one of the main arteries leading to Brighton, there was far too much traffic for safety or comfort. She halted when she saw the familiar uniform of an Automobile Association scout, and sought information as to a less popular route. The man directed her to the Epsom Downs and the Old Roman Road to Dorking.

Thenceforth the hours passed most agreeably. At one o'clock she bought apples and biscuits in a village shop, sheltering in the nearest thicket to munch them.

She basked in the sun for a long time, and grew so interested in the furtive gambols of a colony of rabbits, with lordly pheasants stalking about as if their wings were meant for ornament rather than use, that she nearly lost count of time.

At a quarter to four she found herself on a hill overlooking Dorking. Here a rose-bowered inn, announcing itself as "The King's Head," thrust a tea garden to the verge of the road; so Peggy wheeled her bicycle through a trellis, and who should be there but Monica, with a young man, seated at the first table on the right?

The parlor maid blushed scarlet, evidently to the astonishment of her companion, but Peggy only laughed.

"What luck!" she cried. "Somehow, I thought I might run across you. You see, I followed your good example—to a certain extent, anyhow. I am dying for a cup of tea. May I join you?"

Monica plucked up courage, explained breathlessly that the young man—name of Fred—was present by the merest accident, and kicked the said Fred under the table as a signal to order a fresh pot of tea and some cakes. He acted with such eagerness that Peggy had not the heart to say she meant paying for her own refreshments.

Fred was bashful, but most polite. He had not the remotest notion as to who Monica's well spoken if quietly dressed friend might be, though, in his own phrase, he began to "smell a rat" when the one girl invariably addressed the other as "miss." There was talk about the weather, and the bicycles, and the good fortune which brought them together in this pretty place, which harmless chatter goes to prove that the Hon. Peggy was not the least bit of a snob.

At last she glanced at her wrist watch. It was nearly a quarter past four.

"Good gracious!" she cried. "I shall never get back to Sutton by five, and my train leaves then!"

"There's another fast train at six, miss," said the parlor maid; "but, if you're in a hurry, you can go back by train from Dorking, and me and Fred can return the bike and collect the deposit. I'll be at the house before ten."

After a brief discussion as to times and distances, Peggy had just elected to catch the six o'clock train from Sutton, when a somewhat peculiar incident drew her attention.

Two men, standing in the center of the roadway in front of the inn, were so intent in low-toned conversation that a swift and remarkably silent motor bicycle swept around a corner hidden by trees, and was on them before they were aware of its nearness. No actual danger threatened. The cyclist swerved skillfully; but the pair in the road must have been nervous subjects, for they sprang aside in alarm, and collided with each other.

Presumably, in the light of subsequent events, one was either examining or handing over to his companion a half crown at the very instant when the motor cycle seemed to be on top of them. Be that as it may, Peggy, who was so seated as to command a clear view, saw the coin roll toward her, and, with the crass ingenuity often displayed by inanimate objects, thrust itself into a crack between two curbstones. There were many such stones along the side of the roadway, but only one open crevice, and the half crown found that solitary refuge, burying itself so snugly that it could not be seen by any one not aware of the exact hiding place of the coin, unless the searcher's eyes happened to peer into the quarter-inch division from which the cement had vanished.

II

Peggy could not be sure, of course, that the coin had been in the possession of either of the men. It might conceivably have been lying unnoticed on the road, to be spun into activity by the speeding machine. But she heard the younger of the pair rip out an oath and say that he had "dropped the token"—adding an offensive epithet never used in polite society. His curiously violent language, however, was not nearly so remarkable as the strange behavior of his companion. The other man, after a frenzied glance at an apparently innocent road, decided that Fred—interested now, but whose head had turned a fraction of a second too late to notice what actually had happened—must have picked up the missing coin.

He leaped through the trellised arch with a nimbleness suggestive of a panther's spring, though he looked all of fifty-five years of age, or even more.

"Give me that half crown!" he said, in a reedy, high-pitched voice. "It rolled this way, and you must have seen it. There is no one else!"

The words were offensive enough, but the rage in the speaker's face was so demoniac that it branded Fred as a thief without any sort of extenuation.

Peggy's first impression was that he resembled an animal, her second that he was rather of the vulture tribe. His forehead sloped away from protuberant eyebrows nearly destitute of hair. His sallow cheeks were sunken, and a vindictive mouth was hardly veiled by a scanty mustache and a tuft of beard on lower lip and chin. But his prominent eyes supplied an almost redeeming feature, though they were aflame with the fury now sparkling in their brown depths. His hands were literally talonlike, and his sparse frame was evidently compact of tense sinews. In fact, the suggestion of a human bird of prey was most convincing, were it not for the eyes, which were those of a poet or artist—certainly those of a dreamer.

Fred, who had helped to shatter the Hindenburg line, was not a fit subject to be addressed in such hectic fashion, especially before his best girl and her pal.

" Wot 'arf crown?" he demanded wrathfully, rising to his feet, and kicking his chair out of the way, in case, as the French say, he had to step back in order to jump farther.

The stranger was livid with anger, and, Peggy imagined, with fear as well. His attitude was so outrageous that she resented it strongly, and was minded not to stop the imminent quarrel at once by pointing out the coin's shy nook. She was sure Fred could take care of himself. Very well, let this rascal be punished!

" The half crown which my friend dropped," came the vulturine stranger's answer. " You have it. I know you must have it. Hand it over, or I'll tear your liver out, you—"

Fred was quick on the trigger. The concluding word, probably a nasty one, was smothered by a queer cough, as Fred's left drove home into the speaker's chest, hurling him into the arms of his companion.

" No more o' that," said Fred quietly, " or the next one will smash that crooked conk of yours! There's nothing to be afraid of, Monna," he went on, because Monica screamed. " I can 'andle a baker's dozen like 'im, any day!"

The aggressor's right hand dropped to his coat pocket, but the second man grabbed his arm, muttering hoarsely:

" *Tiens, mon vieux!* Here comes a policeman. Be off, quick! I believe we can find that piece later."

The two hurried away to the left, or toward Sutton, leaving Fred and the two girls to gaze blankly after them.

" Well, if that doesn't beat the band!" commented Fred. " Didjer ever—"

No, Monica had certainly never; but she did hope Miss Mainwaring was not alarmed.

Peggy had not been alarmed at any stage of the proceedings, though that significant action by Fred's assailant gave her a thrill, the obvious inference being that he was about to produce a pistol. The men had disappeared when she stepped out into the roadway.

A tall policeman was strolling up leisurely from the opposite direction. She stooped, prized out the half crown with a hairpin, and said, with a laugh:

" Here is the cause of all the trouble. This policeman can arrange with the landlord to give it to that foolish old person when he returns, and also to warn him not to behave so idiotically in future."

While speaking, she glanced at the coin. By one of those idle chances which seem to decide the great events of life, it was lying in her hand with the head uppermost, and her alert eyes instantly detected something so strange, so bizarre, in a defacement which had been inflicted on his majesty's portrait in low relief, that she was aware of a new sensation added to the many she had experienced during the previous minute. She felt a premonition of evil, of some influence so sinister and malevolent that both the stranger's wild outburst and Fred's sturdy readiness to settle a dispute by a straight blow were dwarfed at once into insignificance.

Some madman, using a steel punch and a hammer, had driven three dagger-shaped wedges into the king's head. There could be no manner of doubt as to the intent of the person who had thus maltreated the coin. The injuries depicted could hardly be the outcome of an accident. Each had a convincingly murderous semblance.

The punch, or cold chisel—though, if it were the latter, it must have been ground to a peculiar shape—had been adjusted so as to convey the suggestion of a thoroughly effective thrust, and then a tremendous blow with a heavy mallet had driven the steel well into the softer metal. One wound pierced the forehead, a second the back of the head, and a third the base of the skull.

Peggy believed vaguely that the half crown had been maltreated in this way quite recently. Hardly knowing why, she turned it and examined the date—1915. So it had been minted during the Great War. So far as she could discern, there were no marks on that side, and the coin itself was not badly worn—not enough, indeed, to account for its seven years of life.

Then she realized the singular fact that if she had not held it at first so as to discern those horrid-looking stabs, she might never have noticed them at all, as she would hardly have scrutinized it again before handing it to the policeman—who, by the way, was now only a few yards distant.

She gazed at him, and promptly yielded to another slight shock, since she had never before set eyes on just such a representative of law and order. For one thing, he was a sergeant—a very young sergeant. For another, he might have been the captain of the Guards company who smiled at her that morning opposite Buckingham Palace, were it not that the one man wore sober blue and the other a magnificent blend of scarlet and gold.

He was looking at her, too, not critically or obtrusively, but doubtless wondering why this pretty girl was staring at him with those wide-open eyes. The Hon. Peggy Mainwaring had, of course, met lots of policemen, sergeants, inspectors, and even superintendents. She knew by sight many of those on duty in Mayfair, and she could name a score, or more, in Derbyshire and Scotland. So she was not likely to be nervous in speaking to any police sergeant, no matter how young and good-looking he might be.

" I want to have a word with you," she said, collectedly enough. " A strange thing happened here not two minutes ago, and I think you ought to know about it."

" Certainly," said the sergeant. " I am completely at your service."

She remembered afterward that she was surprised again by his well bred accent, which argued a public school education. He stood easily, neither nibbling the chin strap of his helmet nor thrusting his thumbs into his belt. These things did not concern her, however. With the concise clearness of one sure of her ground, she told him exactly what had taken place since the motor cyclist whizzed past, evidently interesting him by her description of "*mon vieux,*" and still more gripping his attention by her Parisian French.

He was frankly bewildered by sight of the marked coin. At first, as he confessed a little later, he failed to find in its dents the disturbing influence it had exercised on Miss Mainwaring. That was very wrong of him. Though he could not guess it, he was losing precious time just then; but his mind was actually focused on what seemed to be a story of possible assault and battery. His only excuse was that he really was a young sergeant, and his informant a remarkably pretty girl. For all that, his manner was an admirable blend of sympathy and officialdom.

" You say the younger man, who spoke French, alluded to this as ' the token,' " he repeated thoughtfully. " That is odd, distinctly odd. When read in the light of the other fellow's excitement, it raises a doubt in one's mind as to their object in life. Is this the man who hit the old boy who started the trouble?"

Yes. Fred — a rather sheepish Fred—posted now as to the Hon. Peggy's identity, came forward and gave brief testimony. So did Monica. All the time the sergeant was examining the half crown, or nearly all the time, as he stole an occasional glance at Peggy, being thoroughly mystified when he had summed up her friends. But he was a wide-awake police officer.

" Those two cannot have gone far," he said. " I'd like to have a look at them. May I borrow your bike?"

This to Fred, who consented readily, and the sergeant sped away.

Peggy, availing herself of a breathing space, requested Monica and Fred not to be unnecessarily descriptive in regard to herself.

" We may never hear another word about this affair," she explained. " On the other hand, there is a chance—a slight one—that the police may want our evidence, and this sergeant will probably ask for our names and addresses. I wish to keep titles and that sort of thing completely out of it. I'm sure you understand?"

Monica did, beyond doubt. Both Lady Copmanthorpe and Mr. Hobbs would regard the whole business with marked disfavor. Moreover, she could not help speculating as to Miss Mainwaring's reason for not having quelled the disturbance forthwith by disclosing the whereabouts of the half crown. That was strange, to say the least. Why, it nearly led the valiant Fred into a horrid fight!

Monica, be it remembered, was not then aware of the problematic pistol; but Fred was. He had actually grabbed an iron-topped table to serve as a buckler while he charged, having learned in a hard school that it is the height of foolishness to stand still and allow the other fellow to shoot unhindered — or unhindenburghed, as he would put it in his lighter moments.

A sort of general compact was made before the police sergeant came back. The earth seemed to have swallowed the supposed lunatic and his friend, he said, though it could be taken for granted they had skulked off among the trees. However, he would try a longer cast on foot. Now, as to descriptions—

Between them, the three supplied tolerably accurate pictures. Fred, who had vignetted many varieties of foreigners at unpleasantly close quarters, believed the older man was a Russian or a Pole, while Peggy testified to a sort of accent, a tone rather than a mispronunciation.

"Don't you think a half crown should be left here in an envelope?" she suggested, producing a purse.

"I'll do that," said the sergeant quickly.

"You mean you will provide the money? All right! But won't it be more cautious if my friend, Monica, talks to the landlord, and tells him the coin was found on the path?"

The police sergeant conveyed by a look that some one was highly intelligent, since he grasped the essential suppressions of fact in those two brief sentences.

"Capital!" he agreed, handing Monica a coin from which, as Peggy saw, the king's minted portrait gleamed in placid perfection. "And now, where can I find you all?" he went on.

Miss Monica Jackson and Miss Margaret Mainwaring supplied the Curzon Street address. Mr. Frederick Blenkey gave one at Ewell.

"By the way," said the sergeant, pencil in hand, "how do you spell your name, Miss Mainwaring?"

"Oh, the swank way," she smiled, having foreseen this question.

She watched, and observed that he wrote her surname correctly. It was time now to make for Sutton, and, realizing that Fred and Monica were undecided, Peggy asked them to accompany her.

"It is possible," said the sergeant, "you may pass those fellows if they have taken to the road again. In that case, you might let the Sutton police know. I'll telephone them later."

"Why?" inquired Fred. "It's not so very serious, is it?"

"One never can tell. I would like one of our plain-clothes men to get on their track, and find out something about them. Oh, you ought to have my name—Acting Sergeant Linton, Surrey County Constabulary, Dorking."

They rode off. Sergeant Linton looked after them.

"I suppose she's a governess or lady's maid," he mused. "She's a jolly nice girl, anyhow!"

And Peggy was thinking that the conditions of after-the-war life must have brought an entirely new class of men into the county constabulary, though she could hardly discuss the point with her present companions.

The three had a quite uneventful ride to Sutton, but it was otherwise with Sergeant Linton. He was vouchsafed that which is a necessary element of success in nearly all human affairs, and in none more than the detection of crime—a slice of luck.

III

YET, if luck lent a hand, Sergeant Linton merited it by doing the right thing. It would have been quite wrong to go hunting the outskirts of woods, when so large an area of cover was spread for men who had already revealed their desire to slink unseen. His best chance of meeting the strange pair again that day was to lurk around the inn, in the hope that they might return and renew their search for the missing coin, as, indeed, the younger man had suggested.

Of course, Linton himself had actually set eyes on them, but at a distance, and before he had any idea that closer attention to their clothing and semblance might yield valuable assets. Unfortunately, they, too, had seen him, so his mere presence in uniform might prove disastrous.

He solved this problem by hastening to a wayside garage, and borrowing a mechanic's jacket and overall of blue dungaree, with some brown paper and string. Retiring to a part of the wood whence he could watch the road in front of the King's Head, he removed his tunic, helmet, collar, and tie, turned up his trousers, and donned the less becoming garments, which were so smeared with oil and black grease that his face and hands were soon of a professional tint—if tint be the word to express a grimed skin. The discarded articles he made into a parcel.

He did not forget to extract pipe and tobacco from a pocket of his tunic. He had no cap, but he ruffled his hair, and buttoned the coat collar to conceal a far too clean shirt. Satisfied that this disguise would serve its purpose, he strolled into the inn's tea garden, and ordered a pint of beer, seating himself much nearer the building than the spot occupied by Miss Mainwaring and her friends.

The Hon. Peggy figured most largely in his thoughts. He dismissed her companions as stage supernumeraries. Indeed, other considerations apart, she was the one witness of any real value, with Fred a fair second.

Nor did he fail to note the curious coincidence of the name of the inn and the damaged surface of the half crown. There was nothing in this, of course. It simply added a quaint accessory to a slight but rather unusual incident.

The maid whom he had asked for the beer sent the landlord instead.

"Sorry, my man," said the latter. "I can't serve you here. This garden is reserved for visitors and tourists."

In effect, dirty dungarees looked very much out of place, and might offend the eyes and nostrils of the noble patrons of the establishment.

Sergeant Linton did not argue; he merely pleaded.

"It's long after tea time," he said, "and people will hardly dine outside. I'm hot and tired. Please break your rule for once!"

He spoke so pleasantly, and hinted so adroitly that motoring aristocrats "dined" each evening at the King's Head, that the landlord softened.

"All right," he said. "But, look here, my lad—if any ladies turn up, hop it. The bar's round the corner."

The sergeant, vastly obliged, promised to hop it instantly, not only to save the face of a notable hotel, but also because, as he put it, he couldn't expect to make much of a hit with the girls in his present garb.

Thenceforth, for a long thirty minutes, he smoked and sipped the beer. He was almost reduced to consuming a second pint of a rather thin brew when a man walked up briskly, and, if any doubt as to his identity with "*mon vieux*" could have existed, removed it by conducting a careful search of the road and pathway in front of the entrance to the tea garden.

After a methodical survey of every possible and impossible chink and cranny which could conceal so large a coin as a half crown—he did not miss the crack where it had actually reposed for so brief a time—he entered the garden, evidently to make inquiries.

At that moment the mechanic was lighting his pipe, and chanced to burn his fingers, stating his views on the accident with the fluency and freedom of language acquired by the British army in Flanders during many campaigns. The newcomer gave him no heed, but passed on. The neighborhood was singularly quiet at that hour—about half past five o'clock. The beer drinker could hear every word of an interesting conversation.

"Did any one, by chance, say they had found a half crown on the roadway outside?" inquired the reedy, high-pitched voice so accurately described by Miss Mainwaring.

The landlord answered.

"About what time would that be, mister?" said he.

"Let me see—it would be about twenty minutes after four."

"Right y'are! You're lucky. A young lady picked up something—she didn't say it was a half crown—and left it in an envelope. If it's half a crown, why, then, it's yours."

Evidently there followed business of fetching an envelope from some interior room, opening the same, and the landlord's congratulations on proof of claim.

The fortunate owner listened in silence. Linton, if he dared, would have gone in then, and snatched another look at the man's face; but he deemed it wiser to sit still.

"Ah!" said the voice at last, and now it held a note of harshness. "An honest young lady, indeed! I would like to thank her. Is she here?"

"No, but she gave me her name. She's a Miss Monica Jackson, and she lives at Lady Copmanthorpe's house in Curzon

Street—one of the maids, I suppose, out for a spin with her regular."

"Her regular?"

"Her young man."

"Ah, good! I remember him. Will you tell me the name and address again, please?"

The third but unobtrusive party to this interview, like most eavesdroppers, had heard more than he expected or liked. What had possessed the fool of a girl to advertise herself in that manner? Probably some feeling of pique at not being altogether in the limelight earlier; or, it might be, some vague sense of self-importance at being employed in a house of the mighty, for Lord Copmanthorpe, now stricken with lumbago in Scotland—hence his wife's hurried departure from London—was a member of the government. Linton, of course, was not yet aware either of his lordship's indisposition or of his family name.

"Thank you," said "*mon vieux,*" and came out.

The mechanic was already shambling toward the bar, but he knew that the other must now have a suspicious eye for all the world if the disappearance of a particular half crown meant so much; so he did not attempt to turn, or even stoop to tie a shoelace which he had undone purposely.

Without hesitation, he made his way from the bar through a passage leading to the main part of the inn.

"Hell!" cried a surprised landlord, meeting him.

"Sorry," said Linton, "but I think that old boy wants a chauffeur. I don't know him, but a pal described him. He lives near here, doesn't he?"

"Not him! Never saw him afore, and I never want to see him again. I've just handed him a half crown he'd lost, an' he didn't so much as ask me to have a beer."

"Wasn't he pleased?"

"Pleased! He looked at it as if it had changed into a penny."

"Well, so long! He's not likely to be of much use to me, if he's as stingy as all that."

The mechanic headed for the main entrance, and the landlord was minded to recall him; but, as he seemed a nice, civil-spoken young fellow, he was allowed to go.

Linton hid behind the festoons of a Dorothy Perkins rose just in time to see his quarry halt and look back before reaching a bend in the road. Then the sergeant hurried from the garden into the wood, dived among the trees for some fifty yards at a right angle, ran a good three hundred yards parallel with the road, and, risking ultimate failure, turned toward the road again.

As it happened, his calculations were sound. He was well screened by the undergrowth when "*mon vieux*" and another man walked past. He took stock of the newcomer in profile, and summed him up as being also a foreigner. They were talking earnestly, but it was impossible to learn more than that they spoke in French.

Now began the most difficult bit of scouting Linton had ever done, and he was no novice in the art, whether in peace or war. He had to keep well under cover, because these human foxes might double back on their trail. Every fifty yards or so he sighted them, and, after hard going for a mile—the wood being a wilderness of unthinned timber and uncut briers—he had the good fortune, during one of these peeps, to see them turn into a path which must intersect his own track.

If he had hitherto moved with the stealth of a skilled hunter, he now had to be wary as a tiger stalking its prey. It would be foolish to try and head them again, since one could not hope to strike a straight diagonal line through this tangle of greenery at a season when every leaf was out. So he followed the road, judged his pace, and took boldly to the footpath, which began to descend. He seemed to remember that the ordnance map showed this wood as ending a long way from the valley. Hence, he slackened the pursuit when the sky became more visible.

He was rewarded by seeing the pair who used such a strange "token," and were so perturbed by its loss, already halfway across some meadowland, and making for a secluded house of some pretensions. Beyond its front garden and lawn, which were screened by trees and shrubs, a carriageway led to the highway far beneath. This, he knew, was the main road from Dorking to Leatherhead.

They entered the house. He sat down, and lighted his pipe.

Five minutes later a Ford car sped along the drive, and dashed off toward London.

"A Ford!" said Linton to himself. "How many Fords are snorting into town at this hour? Even if I had a telephone at my elbow, I don't know the number of the insect. At any rate, so far, so good. I've done something worth while, I think."

Then, not regarding himself as by any means a heaven-sent genius of a detective, or one gifted with the lightning powers of deduction which are the recognized attributes of every famous sleuth in fiction, he set to work straightway to review the actual facts within his ken.

He made a start by producing the battered half crown, and studying it attentively. The punch which had been used upon the silver piece must almost have been contrived for its specific purpose, since the rim of the coin was not bitten into, and the effect of a thrust by spearhead or dagger was secured by a pointed wedge exactly half an inch in length. The positions of the cuts, too, did not seem to be accidental.

It occurred to Linton that they might resemble the Roman numeral "IV," which is the symbol for "4," except on the faces of clocks and watches. The notion was a far-fetched one, of course; but what ordinary standard of thought could apply to any lunatic who defaced the king's currency in such malicious fashion?

"By Jove!" he thought. "That in itself is an offense against the law. I must look up the section. If nothing better offers, it might be an excuse for an arrest."

A search through his pockets brought to light another half crown dated 1915. Careful comparison showed that the rim of the damaged coin was perceptibly broader than that of the presumably typical one in his own possession. The whole superficial area was bigger, too. These things were noteworthy, though he was convinced that the token, as its former possessor had called it, was quite genuine. However, the seeming variations between the two molds supplied a problem for some expert at the mint. It would be solved readily there.

That word "token" was suggestive. The younger man said he had dropped it. Supposing those dents did really represent a numeral, was the younger man No. 4, and "*mon vieux*" No. 1, 2, or 3? If so, for what purpose were they in league? Was it altogether fantastic to believe that in the disturbed England of to-day, with a distracted Ireland on one side and a volcanic Europe on the other, there might actually exist a number of misguided men banded in some wretched organization which sought the life of the king as the admitted head of our social order?

Linton was not afraid to let his imagination run riot. A wise old superintendent had said to him recently:

"Never check your thoughts, but, if in doubt, consult the police manual before you act. Reasonable doubt is a sort of first cousin to decision."

IV

It was now six o'clock, and Linton ought to be in Dorking by seven, at the latest, if the routine of duty were to be observed.

He was about to rise when a woman emerged from the cottage and took the Dorking road. Though tempted, he saw it would be folly to try a long slant downhill through the cultivated land, to overtake her. If this well screened dwelling held its own mysteries, who could tell that a watcher was not on guard in an attic? In that case, what a scurry of suspicious alarm would arise from the sight of a man emerging from the wood and hurrying across country!

Monica Jackson, parlor maid in the home secretary's London residence, had blundered badly in identifying herself so thoroughly when the orthodox half crown had been substituted for its somewhat ominous fellow. The presence of a possible spy, however, would convert uneasiness into certainty.

Linton tried to visualize this woman's height, gait, and garments at a distance of six hundred yards. He succeeded so well that, after wiping his face, resuming his uniform, returning the dungaree suit, and reaching Dorking, he met and recognized the same woman crossing the river on her way back. They were alone on the bridge at the moment, but she did not look at him, seeming to be absorbed in the scenery to such an extent that her face was averted.

She wore a coat and skirt of brown cloth, and a nondescript felt hat. Her boots were of the light gray kid affected by Frenchwomen, though, if she were French, she had none of the elegance of a Parisienne in either costume or carriage. Her features in profile were well shaped, but her ungloved hands were large and coarse. From a wicker basket obtruded the feet of two fowls. Paper bags held the remainder of the contents.

Leaving nothing to guesswork, the sergeant hastened to a point on the opposite hill whence he could watch the house. In due course, the shopper entered its driveway. He felt that, at any rate, he had now a nodding acquaintance with some of the occupants of the place. A few minutes later he reported the circumstances to a senior officer, who, like himself, began by treating the affair as unimportant, but ended by taking it seriously.

"Tell you what," said the superintendent, Mr. MacDermott, "let's run in and consult old Jenkins, the chemist. He has a flashlight photographic apparatus, and is a rare one for holding his tongue. He will rush out a print, and one of our men who is going up to town by the eight forty-five to-night will take it straight to Scotland Yard. They may know something. At any rate, it will do no harm."

Jenkins was interested, and had two prints ready when Linton arrived after a much needed meal. Moreover, the chemist had weighed the suspect coin against another of the 1915 date, and found it half a grain lighter.

"Compare your half crown with a print," he said, "and see if any special feature suggests itself."

Probably for purposes of more effective lighting, he had tilted the coin so that the normal perpendicular lay back at an angle of forty-five degrees, and Linton was astonished by the difference. The silver disk appeared on a black ground, and, if the original were sinister in aspect, the print was almost affrighting. Just as an ordinary photograph, by chance combinations of light and shade, may exaggerate or soften certain marked characteristics of the human face to an extent that almost destroys any real likeness, so did this reproduction accentuate the evil intent of the person who caused those strange marks.

"Great Scott!" cried Linton. "The thing looks worse than ever!"

"Yes. My view is that the sooner you gentlemen lay by the heels whoever is responsible for this maltreatment of his majesty's minted portrait, the better it will be. Of course, I ask no questions, but I shall be glad to hear of developments, and I will assist you in any way. Ugly as that damaged coin appears, there is an amusing side to the inquiry. It withstood the nitric acid test perfectly, whereas a 1921 half crown turned green at once. Funny sort of alloy they must be using at the mint these days!"

The station clerk was a competent typist, so Linton dictated a fairly complete statement, omitting no item of importance in the record of events since the hour when some unknown cyclist raised more dust than he knew of in front of the King's Head tea garden.

"Queer thing!" said the superintendent, after glancing through the report. "One wouldn't attach much weight to this if the photograph were not available. I'm not a nervous subject, but, somehow, that picture gives me the creeps."

Sergeant Linton smiled.

"Government departments are always annoyed, sir," he said, "if any effort is made to polish up a memorandum. I remember a general objecting to the phrase 'flashes of lurid light' in a description of a night attack."

"I wasn't criticizing your style. What struck me is the absolute triviality of each incident in itself, yet the ultimate conviction one has of something dangerous, even deadly, when the whole array of facts is looked at. I wish that stupid young woman had kept quiet! The other one must be rather intelligent."

"She was more than that, sir," Linton returned. "I am more and more impressed by the recollection that she sensed in a few seconds what I took many precious minutes to see."

"Some women are intuitive beyond belief; but you lost no time. Why, you've pieced this jig saw puzzle together as well as the best man in the Yard could have done it. Mind you collect your half crown, and the price of that pint of beer! The county pays."

Linton was free now for the night. Indeed, he should have gone off duty at seven.

He went to his quarters, and read law until ten o'clock. Then he returned to the office, meaning to sit there and smoke for an hour. The messenger would now be reaching Scotland Yard, and, in the improbable event of a telephonic inquiry, he wanted to be on the spot.

And, behold, a call came through almost at once.

"The Yard on the phone," announced the station sergeant. "You'd better take it," he added.

As Linton put his ear to the receiver, a queer, cracked voice, such as a music hall comedian cultivates, inquired:

"That Superintendent MacDermott?"

"No—Acting Sergeant Linton."

"Ah, the very man! How old are you?"

"Twenty-eight."

"A bit late in making a start, but you seem to have struck oil this time. Your story—"

"May I inquire who is speaking?"

"Detective Inspector Furneaux, of the criminal investigation department. Now, don't interrupt again, Acting Sergeant Linton. Your story seems to fit in with a crazy sort of yarn spun by a Regent Street vendor of dope who was run in at Vine Street two nights ago. He sniveled, and said he was really doing the law a good turn, s'elp him if he wasn't. Go now and find Mr. MacDermott, and ask him to oblige us by having that house watched night and day until he hears further."

"Should we begin to-night?"

"Why not?"

"I was merely putting a suggestion in an interrogative form."

"Were you, indeed? What school did you go to?"

"Marlborough."

"Phew! And you only a uniformed bobby at twenty-eight?"

"That is but a small part of my sad history."

"I think I shall like you. I'll try and run over to Dorking to-morrow afternoon. Now I'll put a suggestion in an affirmative form. Tell your superintendent that Mr. Furneaux will be glad if you are given charge of this job; but don't get a swollen head on that account. I have a special hatred of uniformed men who believe they can teach the Yard a thing or two. Oh, before you go—is this Miss Mainwaring good-looking?"

"Excessively so."

"Don't use such an inappropriate word! No woman can be too good-looking, though too many are intolerably plain. She's a thoroughly nice girl, I take it?"

"Yes—I think I prefer that description."

"You married?"

"No."

"I thought not. Well, arrange matters with Mr. MacDermott. See you to-morrow, D.V., though what D may V for Scotland Yard twelve hours in advance, a wretched worm like me can never predict."

Acting Sergeant Linton had not been a member of the Surrey County Constabulary so long as Mr. Furneaux seemed to imagine. Hence, being absorbed in the humdrum duties of a country policeman, he had not heard of the Scotland Yard detective least known to the general public, yet perhaps the most famous man now employed by that office.

Whoever Mr. Furneaux might be, he was unquestionably an oddity. His voice was queer, his utterances were even more queer, the way in which he jumped from subject to subject was the queerest of all. What on earth did he mean by his questions about Miss Mainwaring? He thought so, he said, after being assured as to her physical charms. What did it concern him whether or not an acting sergeant at Dorking was married?

While a colleague was summoning Mr. MacDermott by telephone, Linton ran through the wording of his report, to discover the clew which set Mr. Furneaux's wits working. He had written:

> Miss Mainwaring spoke so convincingly that, though minded to treat the affair as unimportant, I decided to investigate it thoroughly.

And again:

> Miss Mainwaring should be a dependable witness. She is cool, level-headed, and sincere.

Was that it? Not a very strong foundation for Mr. Furneaux's theorizing! Confound the fellow, was he hinting that the sight of a pretty face could warp one's judgment? But here came Mr. MacDermott, who sent a reserve constable post haste to recall a man on night duty, and placed both at Sergeant Linton's disposal.

"The Yard evidently looks for developments," he commented. "But they're close, ridiculously close. They have, or seem to have, a belief that the average policeman is a bungler. Well, it is true, painfully true, that a long course of detecting chicken thieves and petty shoplifters is not the best of training for dealing with the higher criminology, but we fellows ought to be allowed a chance of proving our mettle when a real crime occurs. I can assure you of one thing, Linton. If this affair shows signs of being something big, it won't be my fault if the Yard steps in and grabs all the credit when we have done all the dirty work!"

"Do you know Mr. Furneaux, sir?"

"Oh, yes! He is undoubtedly a genius. If you're lucky you will see him at work, and it will be an education. Not that I personally approve of his methods. He has a knack of projecting his own wits into a criminal's mind, and guessing what the next move will be. Psychology, I think he calls it. One of these days a judge will catch him at his tricks, and there will be a rare dust up in the Old Bailey. I'm sure Furneaux never acts within the law. He is a law unto himself; but he is fortunate in the fact that his immediate chief, Mr. Winter, follows what one may call the orthodox methods. Winter is a big fellow, massive, blond, very affable. Furneaux might be a jockey or an actor, but he certainly is a terror to crooks. Between the pair of them, a front rank scoundrel has as much chance of escaping as—"

The telephone rang again. At that moment the two constables entered.

"Scotland Yard on the phone, sir," said the station sergeant.

Mr. MacDermott motioned to Linton to listen in on a second receiver.

"That you, Linton?" came Furneaux's voice.

The Scotland Yard detective spoke sharply now, with a staccato clipping of syllables that was almost a yelp. The change was marked and unmistakable, just as the whimpering of a hound in the covert announces certainty when before there was only suspicion.

"He is here, at the phone, but MacDermott speaking," was the reply.

"Twenty minutes ago, at ten five or thereabouts, the girl Monica Jackson — I am assuming this—was about to enter Lord Copmanthorpe's house when she was accosted by a man who had evidently been waiting for her, while a taxi drew up slowly to the curb. She made some reply, and was hustled, screaming, into the cab. One of our men, Foster, who had been sent from the nearest police station to make inquiries as soon as Sergeant Linton's report was read here, arrived at that moment, but, when he tried to interfere, was stabbed so seriously that he may not recover. He was able, however, to tell Lord Copmanthorpe's butler what had happened. The butler came out when he heard the screams. The cab, of course, had gone, girl and all. Now I advise that the Box Hill house be not raided to-night, but very closely watched. Have a hidden motor cyclist available if any car leaves there. He should arrest the occupants when an opportunity offers as they pass through some town. Naturally, all your men should be well armed. Let them shoot to kill if resisted in the execution of their duty. It is quite clear that this gang won't have any scruples in that respect. Excuse me, superintendent, but has Linton got all this?"

"Every word."

"Splendid! We know we can depend on you, Mr. MacDermott. Ring, if there's any fresh news. I'll do the same."

The superintendent hung up the phone.

"We've got to make a night of it," he said briskly, turning away to give instructions to the station sergeant as to providing the additional help now needed.

The telephone bell jangled again, and Linton picked up the receiver.

"Oh, thank goodness!" cried an agitated voice which he recognized at once. "Is that you, Mr. Linton?"

"Yes, Miss Mainwaring," he said.

"Have you heard the dreadful thing that happened here?"

"You mean about Miss Jackson and Detective Foster?"

"So you *do* know! I have been trying for fifteen minutes to get through, but the wretched telephone service—"

"Don't blame the exchange. Scotland Yard was on the wire."

"Is *that* the reason? Well, of course, I couldn't tell. But what has become of poor Monica?"

"I should imagine—"

He caught Mr. MacDermott's eye, the superintendent having grabbed the other receiver.

"That she is safe enough," he went on. "But guessing is absolutely useless. Give me your phone number. If we have anything important to communicate, you will hear of it. Will you excuse me now? I have not a second to spare."

"Good-by! I have faith in you, Mr. Linton. Please, please, rescue our Monica, though, indeed, I grieve, too, for that brave detective! I saw him. Whoever drove that knife into his breast meant murder!"

V

"I ALWAYS try to be fair," growled the superintendent, as he and Linton walked down the main street to the Leatherhead Road. A motor cyclist had preceded them, and four constables were to follow in pairs, so that observant eyes might not notice the passing in one direction of so many members of the local police force at an unusually late hour. "I always try to be fair to the Yard," he repeated, "and this time I must admit that they have stolen a march on us."

Linton was surprised, and said so.

"Oh, they've bested us right enough," said MacDermott sadly. "We were a good many hours ahead of them in this affair, yet they sent a man to Lord Copmanthorpe's house the instant they read your report. That was at ten o'clock, or thereabouts, and here are we just setting a watch on these scoundrels' house at eleven, though it is our own special job."

"But, sir," protested Linton, "they evidently possessed information not known to us. They were already aware of a puzzle which they could not solve until we supplied the key, or, if not quite that, a clew regarded as so important that they took prompt action."

"Um—yes—that's just an excuse. I've looked through so many brick walls in my time that I ought to have seen farther into this one. The big affairs of life nearly always start in a trivial way. I suppose you are too young to have heard of the Muswell Hill murder? Well, the capture of two desperate criminals depended on the fact that a small boy was found playing in the street with a toy lantern."

"Still, in that instance, somebody was killed first," said Linton.

"How can we guess what manner of killing these people may have planned? Mind you, I'm not blaming you. You did everything possible. I ought to have nosed something at once out of your story. I suppose I'm growing old; and the front rank crimes so seldom come into our beat. You'll not understand what I mean till you're fifty. Brought your pipe? Light up. We may not be able to smoke again till our relief comes at four."

"Do you mean to remain all night, sir?"

"Of course! The more I think of this business, the bigger it seems. We're living in crazy times. The motor car has widened the criminal area. Wireless, too, has increased our difficulties. Time was when an international gang, such as this appears to be, wouldn't dream of operating outside of London, or, at best, three or four of the larger provincial cities. Now they can establish relays anywhere. The one factor favoring us fellows in the shires is that every resident in any particular locality is fairly well known, though the advantage in crime detection becomes weaker the nearer we are to London, since so many people who live here have their business and their friends in town. However, Sergeant Hicks should bring us something definite about the occupants of this cottage within the hour."

"I am curious to know where he will begin inquiring," said the younger man.

"At the rate collector's and the post office. The rate collector will probably indicate a house agent, while the postman who serves that district will know whether or not letters and parcels go there, and to whom they are addressed."

"I'm afraid I would not have thought of the rate collector," laughed Linton.

"Wait till you're married, and run a place of your own. You'll think of him then—far too often!"

Both men fell silent as they approached the entrance to the suspected house. There was no moon, but the sky was clear, and the dim light of a midsummer night was aided by the stars. The building itself lay fully a hundred yards from the road, and was so shrouded by trees and shrubs that, even if all its windows were illuminated, no hint of interior brilliance could be gained from the lower level of the highway. At any rate, house and foliage now showed only as a deeper smear of blackness on the dark hillside.

The carriageway was not so heavily screened. Its privet hedges were about three feet high, and a couple of chestnut trees towered over white gateposts.

They had just noticed that the gate was closed—a fact which probably rendered superfluous a supply of strong wire which one of the constables was bringing—when they were halted by a slight "S-s-s-t!" from a hedge on the right. The motor cyclist crept forward, just sufficiently to reveal himself.

"Would you mind coming here, sir?" he said, being evidently anxious that the others should not remain silhouetted against the white surface of the road.

The superintendent was in uniform. Linton, having changed to a tweed suit earlier in the evening, had not delayed matters by going back to his lodgings.

"Just as I was coming along the road, sir," the policeman whispered to MacDermott, "a car turned in through that gate, which was open then. It was a good thirty yards away, and nipped in so quickly that I couldn't make out how many people were in it—"

"A taxi?" broke in the superintendent.

"No, sir—a Ford roadster, I think."

"All right! Go on. Don't whisper.

Speak in a low tone, and pause to listen after each sentence."

"Well, sir, I cracked on. I saw by their tail light that they hadn't stopped, so I pulled up quietly, came back, wheeling the machine, and hid it here. Then I waited. Good job I did, too. A man came down the avenue on foot, stood outside the gate for a minute or two, looked up and down the road, and then closed the gate. I think I heard a door bang just before you arrived."

"Good work! When the other men join us, we are going inside. You will mount guard at the gate, and let no one come out. Use your lamp, challenge, and, on the least suspicious sign, don't be afraid to shoot. Keep your wits about you, and don't kill anybody just because he is startled. Say who you are, and, if things seem right, get the person or persons to come forward and explain their presence, on the ground that you saw some suspicious characters enter here, and were watching for their reappearance. That will be quite true, you know, as six of us will be up there somewhere. If you need help, whistle. If we whistle, stand fast. I depend on you holding the gate, and keeping it closed. You might bring your bike and jam the handlebar into it. Shelter behind a post, so that you will be fairly well covered if shot at. Got that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, here are the others—talking, of course, and marching all in a row. Skip along the grass and tell them either to shut up or to sing loudly."

Four somewhat abashed constables loomed into sight, led by their guide.

"I wonder you didn't rehearse the 'Policemen's Chorus' from 'The Pirates of Penzance'!" muttered the superintendent. "Now you, and you"—touching two of them—"go back to the next hedge leading up the hill. Follow it until well beyond that house there—the one which this white gate leads to. Then turn to your left until you find a footpath, or cart road—which is it, Sergeant Linton?"

"Both, sir."

"Well, that path leads to the back part of the house. Get near the premises, whether garden or yard, and post yourselves so that you can hear and collar any one leaving the place on that side. Challenge, and show your lamps, of course, but have your automatics ready, too, though you must not shoot unless convinced that the others mean mischief. If anything serious happens, whistle once. If you hear a whistle, make for the back door, demand admission, and, if it is refused, try and break in. On a second whistle—a long one—retreat, disposing yourselves in such a way that you can see and challenge any one emerging, not only by the path but to left or right. Challenge loudly. Nothing may occur, and you will not be relieved until four o'clock, though I may send at dawn telling you to retire up the hill. Keep under cover, wherever you are. Of course, you'll talk, but smoking is not to be thought of. Now, use your wits. This job is either a complete fizzle or something you will remember for the rest of your lives. I give you ten minutes to be on that path."

Two figures stole away.

"Does that gate creak?" the superintendent inquired.

"No, sir. Anyhow, it didn't a while since," said the cyclist.

"Hold it open for us. We want to keep all eyes front."

Without incident, MacDermott and his aids found themselves standing behind a clump of laurels bordering a circular drive, with a flower bed in the center. A light shone faintly through the glass above the front door, but the rest of the house was in darkness. The ground-floor windows were shuttered within—a fact soon revealed by a momentary increase of light in the hall when an inner door was opened, apparently the door leading to a front room on the right of the watchers.

"Luckily you are in plain clothes, Linton," said the chief, after ascertaining that the allotted ten minutes had expired. "Go quietly to the door or windows, and listen. If surprised by anybody, say you want to find out the nearest way to Box Hill, as you were told of a short cut by a path; but, for Heaven's sake, don't take it, or those two warriors will give the game away, even if they don't shoot you. Of course, you may accomplish nothing. On the other hand, you may start our foxes."

Still mindful of the fact that watchful eyes might be peering from an upper window, Linton did not advance furtively, but took to the carriage drive, though he strolled forward so quietly that his feet did not crunch on the gravel. A glance at the front door showed that it had neither knocker nor letter box, but the white disk of an electric bell gleamed at him.

Halting there, he looked up at the windows on the first floor of the house. Apparently he had not been seen. Then he went to the windows of the room which seemed to be occupied.

They were so closely shuttered within that not a chink of light was visible, and he was sure that voices in ordinary conversation could not be heard through that solid screen. He waited some minutes before he thought he could distinguish the scraping of a chair on a parquet floor. Then some one shouted:

"*Mille diables!* Wake up, girl! Here, drink this!"

Though muffled, the words reached him clearly. They reminded him so strongly of an impatient French anæsthetist trying to revive a patient struggling back to consciousness that he turned and waved an arm to the watchers behind the clump of laurels. The three joined him, and he told Superintendent MacDermott what had happened.

Although vague sounds of speech were audible, it was impossible to catch their drift. Suddenly a woman screamed.

"Ah, no, for God's sake! Not that! Not that! Take it away!"

The concluding words rose to an eldritch screech, and a man bellowed, also in a sort of falsetto:

"You will speak, then?"

"Yes, yes! Take it away!" shrilled the woman.

"Have your pistols ready, and watch the upper part of the house!" cried MacDermott to the two constables.

Blowing a shrill peal on a whistle, he sprang to the door, rang the electric bell, which sounded quite near by—in the entrance hall, it would appear. He hammered loudly, too, with the butt of an automatic, and growled over his shoulder to Linton:

"Confound it, this is a steel door!"

He had whistled, of course, intentionally, not only as a warning to the men stationed at the back, but also to create alarm, if not terror, in the minds of those behind the shuttered windows. The clamor of the bell and the thundering on the door might be trusted to achieve the same purpose.

A voice soon came from the hall.

"Who is there?" it demanded. "What is the matter?"

"Open, in the king's name!" said the superintendent.

"Who are you?"

"The police."

"Go away! You have no business here!"

"That is '*mon vieux,*'" muttered Linton in MacDermott's ear.

"If you don't open the door it will be broken in," went on the superintendent.

"Try it!"

The unseen speaker seemed to pick up the gauge of battle with a confidence that was surprising in the circumstances. No matter what the outcome in legal redress for unlawful entry into an inhabited building, few people in the England of to-day are prepared to resist the officers of the law in the execution of that which they deem to be their duty.

"I warn you we are here in force, and well armed!" vociferated MacDermott.

He and the others thought they caught a mocking laugh, and the hall light was extinguished.

VI

The superintendent was a strong man, and he knew how to apply his weight; but a single attempt at a panel with his shoulder told him that crowbars and a battering ram would be needed before a door of solid steel yielded.

"Go for the center window with a jimmy, Adamson," he said to one of the constables. "If they fire at you, try and spring clear. Then we all scatter to the shrubbery, and I'll send for reënforcements. We can keep them boxed up till daylight, at any rate."

From the rear of the house came a series of heavy thuds. The sounds suggested that the back door, also, was constructed of steel.

"We'll let those boys carry on," he said coolly to Linton. "If we get in at all, it will be through a window, though this den of thieves is a fort, not a house!"

Adamson tore the lower sash out of the window with a few vigorous leverings by a jimmy, a veritable housebreaking implement taken from a burglar captured some years earlier in Dorking. Then he attacked the shutters, which were constructed of thinner material than the door, and they began to give way. When a ragged opening of a few inches was made, Linton inserted an electric torch, and peered inside.

He saw a table laid for a meal, with wine bottles and glasses, some of which had been used, but the eatables were untouched.

The chairs were in disorder. On the table stood a small black box, with raised lid. On a couch beyond the table he thought he could discern a corner of a shoulder and the rounded hip of a woman. She was dressed in a blue serge costume, and he remembered that Monica Jackson had worn blue serge that afternoon.

Out of the tail of his eye, so to speak, he fancied he saw something scuttling under an armchair near the fireplace, as if it wanted to hide, but he could not be certain, since the periphery of the rays of an electric torch is a small one, and he had to sweep the whole room with its beams as rapidly as possible. The door of the room was wide open, being so placed that it excluded any view of the passage.

The noise of the assault on the back door now resounded through the house, and was so deafening, while apparently so ineffectual, that MacDermott, peering eagerly over Linton's shoulder, stepped back a pace or two, and blew a long blast on the whistle, whereon the greater clamor ceased.

" Those fellows are doing no good," he said. " They may be missing these fellows' real line of retreat while trying to break a hole through steel with a clothes prop or a paling."

Adamson was making excellent progress. He was readjusting the jimmy to dislodge a hinge when Linton called to the figure on the couch.

" Is that you, Monica Jackson?" he said.

There was no answer. The person lying there was either dead or unconscious.

Adamson's next thrust forced out of position a whole section of the shutter, and Linton instantly thrust a leg over the window sill.

" Don't hurry," came MacDermott's calm voice. " Wait on this side of the table until Adamson and I are in the room."

Perhaps Linton did not obey the order quite literally, but he did stand still and listen, with every faculty tense, the moment he gained the interior. He could hear nothing. A thin mist, bluish white in the light of the lamp, seemed to be sweeping in through the doorway along the floor, as if a wisp of cigarette smoke were floating on an air current.

With the rapidity of judgment born of many a " mopping up " rush through a German trench, he decided instantly that such danger as now threatened could come only from beyond the door, while the electric light switches must be situated in that section of the wall behind the farther jamb, unless some master switch elsewhere had shut off the current at the main. At any rate, he ran that way, threw a light into an empty hall, and found a switch, and not only was the room itself lit up, but—as he learned afterward, because the men at the rear testified to the fact—the hall and upstairs passages were also illuminated.

At that instant, by some instinct rather than actual knowledge gained by breathing through mouth and nostrils, he became aware that the mist wraith which seemed to roll downward from a hidden staircase, instead of rising like smoke, was an enemy more deadly and irresistible than a whole platoon of armed men.

Leaping away from the door, the room being flooded with light now, he shouted loudly to MacDermott, standing near the table, and Adamson, halfway through the window:

" Back, for your lives! Poison gas!"

Picking up the limp body of Monica Jackson, whom he recognized at a glance, Linton ran around the other end of the table and made for the window, holding his breath, and trying to press the girl's mouth and nostrils against his breast. Even with these precautions he was only just in time. As he thrust his burden into the hands of the men outside, since the others obeyed his warning cry forthwith, he felt the faint touch of nausea which is the first warning of gas poisoning. He did not wait to climb out, but plunged forth headlong, careless whether or not face and hands met the litter of broken glass on the ground.

His right hand and left wrist were cut slightly, but he was on his feet in a second, only to know that his faculties were becoming dazed.

" Take care!" he wheezed, not realizing that MacDermott had grasped his arm. " Poison gas! They'll have to—come out —or die!"

So slight was the attack of vertigo that his brain began to clear while the burly superintendent supported him across the lawn to the cover of the trees.

" I'm all right now," he said valiantly. " A miss is as good as a mile, and I just missed swallowing a real dose. That's a peculiarly vicious carbon monoxide. Is the girl dead?"

" I don't know. She is here, lying on the grass, but we can't attend to her now. Can you stand fast, while I and the others cover a wider front?"

"Yes—I'll carry on. How about the men at the rear?"

"They're safe if they have obeyed orders. Smith, move to the left, until you can see that side of the house. Adamson, watch the greenhouse on the right. Sergeant Linton and I—"

A blinding flash of light, and an explosion which was heard as far away as Epsom and Horsham, came from the center of the building, and the solid mass of masonry crumbled into ruin.

Of course, it was the motor cyclist who most accurately described what took place. The six men stationed within a few yards of the house itself were so stunned by the shock that they were either hurled to the ground or collapsed weakly within the next second. No one was rendered absolutely unconscious—which was fortunate, because a fire which succeeded the explosion raged so fiercely that its heat was scorching. Some of the trees began at once to crackle ominously, while their heavy-laden branches groaned and creaked in the air draft which the devouring flames called to their aid from nature's cave of the winds.

MacDermott and Linton, each risen to hands and knees, saw, as in a dream, Monica Jackson's body stretched behind the clump of laurels. Though hardly able to stand upright, they made for her, raised her somehow, contrived a "chair" with entwined arms and clasped hands, and carried her to a point about fifty yards down the drive. Here they were met by Sergeant Hicks, hurrying to communicate the outcome of his inquiries.

"Good Lord, sir!" he quavered. "What has happened?"

"Some one struck a match, I fancy," wheezed the superintendent, on whose bulk these few strenuous minutes had levied a stiff toll. "Take this girl out to the gate, Hicks. Try and halt any passing motorists there till Linton and I make a circuit of the house. Send our cyclist to direct the fire engine. See that the road is kept open for it."

The big man's coolness was admirable. His companion, who knew what it meant to keep one's head when under fire, was able to appreciate the steady nerve which could issue a stream of connected orders at such a moment.

As Sergeant Hicks strode away, Linton turned back with his chief, to search for the four constables.

"I suppose you know how the house has been destroyed, sir?" he said.

"That sort of festivity is more in your line. Explain."

"It was intended that we should all be overpowered, if not actually killed, by the gas. Then an incendiary bomb was timed to end matters."

"And it did. Just look at that pillar of fire!"

Linton remembered the phrase afterward, and was struck by its peculiar aptness. At the moment his wits were too bemused to be capable of other than wholly physical impressions.

The volume and intensity of the roaring furnace within the shell of the house bespoke its chemical origin. The intent was not merely to burn and consume, but to destroy utterly. Metal would yield as readily as matchwood to such vehemence. The very stones were cracking and bursting. Unless the Dorking fire brigade arrived soon, the surrounding boscage would widen the area of ruin.

One thing was certain—no living creature, man or beast, had escaped from the doomed house since the explosion. If any one had emerged earlier, prompt detection seemed inevitable. The distant woods gleamed redly, and the branches and trunks of the trees were visible as in broad daylight. Each ridge and furrow of the nearer meadows stood out clearly. The white tails of scurrying rabbits could be seen three hundred yards away.

On the path up the hill stood two badly frightened policemen, each gripping an automatic, and ready to shoot at the first moving shadow. MacDermott laughed at sight of them.

"The next time those boys are put on special duty, they'll walk like cats on hot bricks the moment they leave the station," he gurgled.

"Is this the end, then?" inquired Linton.

"Not a bit of it! The most desperate criminals are so seldom prepared to sacrifice their own lives that such a possibility may be disregarded. Those fellows have bested us somehow; yet I shall be more than surprised if they get away. Don't you see that this dramatic show was prepared for our benefit? If so, they are safe at this moment; but how, and where? They cannot have gone by air, unless Jules Verne has come to life again, and is putting his romances to practical use. There is only one other way—underground. By the piper that played before Moses, that's it! They have a tunnel somewhere. Let's scatter! Here comes the fire brigade. The question is—"

The superintendent's words were drowned by a loud hissing noise, and the fire died down in a cloud of white steam, which was succeeded by a darkness like unto that inflicted on the land of Egypt.

"We've lost our chance again!" he said bitterly. "This is chemical warfare, with a vengeance! We need enough men to inclose a half mile radius, and there are six of us, with Heaven alone knows how many hundreds of people hurrying here from all directions, and every man jack among them blind as a bat, except the rascals who know just where to go! Hello, what's that?"

"Come quickly, sir!" cried Linton. "Those men on the hill are shooting!"

VII

EVEN as Linton ran, his ears followed the fusillade that broke out on the path at the back of the house. He counted nine shots in all. The policemen's pistols held seven cartridges each. What luck had they had?

Tearing his way through obstacles difficult enough to surmount by day, but proving veritable dragons in the all-pervading gloom, he plunged through the garden, skirted the house, and, after a short but desperate struggle, stumbled into what he believed was the footpath. He was compelled to use a flash light now. MacDermott was lagging far behind, with one or both of the remaining policemen.

Having made certain that he had not erred in direction, Linton shouted loudly, calling the constables by name. At last came a faint response:

"That you, Sergeant Linton?"

"Yes!" he cried.

"Well, poor Cruddas has got his," was the reply. "He's lying here. I'm hit in the right shoulder. They came on us like magic—out of the ground. I blazed away till I was knocked over. Like a kick from a horse it was!"

Knowing full well that at any instant a red glare from out of the black pall which surrounded him might herald his own death or disablement, Linton shut off the electric torch. Creeping onward again, he allowed it to gleam momentarily, and saw one of the policemen sitting up, pressing a handkerchief against his shoulder. Close at hand the other lay prone.

Cutting off the light again, he reached the man who had spoken.

"Help is coming, Tomlin," he said. "Can you hold out a few minutes longer?"

"Oh, yes, I think so, sergeant. It's beginning to burn, so the shock is over."

"Which way did they go, and how many were there?"

"Three men and a woman, I think. Two of the men fired at us. They just rose out of the earth, behind the hedge."

"Who began the shooting?"

"They did, of course — they took us sideways."

"Where is your torch?"

"At my feet. I thought I'd try and stop the bleeding."

Linton groped on the path, and found the lamp.

"If I turn it on, and let it point down hill, the others will see it and come quickly. You'll be safe enough, if that gang has gone toward the wood. They headed that way, I suppose?"

"I haven't the ghost of a notion, sergeant. You're never thinking of following them alone? They'll finish you too easy. And Cruddas should be looked to. I'd attend to him myself if I was able."

It was certainly a fantastic thing to dream of tracking three armed desperadoes through the wood to the road on the summit of Box Hill, but Linton was quivering with anger at the mere notion that the outlaws might even yet be within reach. He was confident none among them could cope with him in swiftness of movement and powers of endurance. He did, however, resolve to wait for MacDermott, whom he heard opening a gate which led from the back garden.

"This way, sir," he said. "We are here."

The light flashed its signal. The superintendent and his two aids were with Linton promptly. After a brief explanation, he asked permission to continue the pursuit with one of the constables.

"So that I may lose two more of my men!" exclaimed MacDermott. "What chance have you of success? Not one in a thousand! Meanwhile, who is to telephone every police station in the district, and circulate a description of two men and a woman whom you alone have seen? No, Linton. You make for the road. Get Sergeant Hicks and a couple of firemen to come and clear our casualties. Some motorist will rush them to the hospital. Try and persuade the driver of another car to take you and that girl, if she has not gone already, to headquarters. If the girl is not actually injured, ask my wife to look after her till I turn up. Then give a full description of events to the station sergeant, and let him get busy on the phone. Go to bed yourself as soon as possible, and be with me at half past eight. You will have a full day to-morrow, and you must be fit for it. Wear plain clothes, and don't forget your warrant card."

A policeman, like a soldier, must obey orders unquestioningly.

"Yes, sir," said Linton, turning on his heel.

He dared not trust himself to utter another word, else his temper might have blazed out in absolute insubordination, for he felt certain that his chief's decision was a blunder.

He found a state of utter confusion among the crowd of motorists and others on the road. A cloud of smoke-laden steam had settled down on them like a black fog, while cars and pedestrians, ably assisted by a snorting fire engine, seemed to have blocked both approaches to the gate.

The main difficulty was that no one, except the police cyclist, knew what had happened. Even he was unable to say why a fire which had lit up the countryside for miles had not only gone out with seemingly miraculous speed, but had also contrived to wrap the whole neighborhood in the darkness of a closed vault. But Linton had experience in handling men in such conditions, which were fairly comparable to an unexpected night attack on the western front during the Great War.

Having discovered that Monica Jackson was lying unconscious in a limousine near the gate, he collected a small squad of police and civilians, instructed them how to force all cars to clear the road by drawing aside according to the traffic rules, and soon had space available for careful movement. By the time he was seated by the side of the insensible girl he saw lights coming down the drive, and knew that the wounded constables were being carried to a car which Sergeant Hicks had backed in to meet them.

He was at a loss to account for his companion's prolonged stupor, since he ascertained forthwith, by her breathing and pulse, that she was alive. He feared that she had been seriously if not mortally injured before her captors left the room in which they had allowed her to recover her wits. But he was well aware that his mind was not working normally, so, with a vigorous effort at self-control, he shut out all considerations save the paramount one—that he should be ready with a concise and simple description of the gang of murderers now at large somewhere in the district.

In the conditions, the criminals could hardly have had a car in readiness at a prearranged rendezvous; at best, they must be walking to a definite hiding place. Even in Linton's disturbed mental state—due, as he knew quite well, to that almost imperceptible whiff of a deadly gas—the word "prearranged" was suggestive. Men who had planned such a sequence of events as the gas, the explosion, the fire, and the liberation of another chemical agent powerful enough to extinguish the fire at the right moment to facilitate their escape, would surely have disguises in readiness. He must remember that probability in drawing up his report.

It occurred to him that whatever else "*mon vieux*" did to change his appearance, he could not alter the expression of his eyes. How clever of that girl, Margaret Mainwaring, to note those peculiar eyes! That was an excellent point. The eyes of an artist, a poet, a dreamer, she said they were.

Fred Blenkey's notion that the man was a Russian or a Pole—that would be helpful, too. Linton feared he might not have thought of those things himself.

But here he was at Dorking police station, and trying to explain to Mrs. MacDermott why, at her husband's request, he was bringing an almost lifeless girl to her house long after midnight. Luckily, the good lady was more concerned about Monica Jackson than as to exact details of the night's happenings, so she and an alarmed maid servant were left to deal with the sufferer.

Then Linton compelled his wits to the more urgent task, but at the back of his head was a certain sympathy with the Curzon Street household's anxiety. Carrying out the superintendent's instructions, he wrote:

> All roads leading from Dorking should be searched at once and until long after daybreak

by strong and well armed patrols for four persons, three men and a woman, wanted for attempted murder and on other charges.

At this point, however, he laid down his pen, gave the station sergeant the Mayfair number, and was soon in touch with Lord Copmanthorpe's residence.

Naturally enough, neither the Hon. Peggy nor the butler had retired to rest. They were far too excited to think of sleep until driven to their rooms by sheer exhaustion. Indeed, Mr. Hobbs and the other servants had found it necessary to uncork two bottles of Lord Copmanthorpe's old port for the soothing of their shattered nerves; so Peggy was easily first in the race to the telephone.

"That you, Mr. Linton?" she said at once.

"Yes," he replied, curtly official, since he had no time to waste. "I rang up to tell you that your friend, Monica Jackson, is now being cared for by Mrs. MacDermott, wife of the superintendent of police at Dorking. She is—fairly well, I think. I'm sorry I can give no further information now. The wire is wanted for police purposes. Good-by!"

Mr. Hobbs wondered why his young mistress should look so much annoyed when she conveyed the news, and should flounce off to her bedroom forthwith, leaving an order to be called at eight.

"One would think she was more vexed than pleased because poor Monica had been found," he said confidentially to the cook; "yet there she's been sitting up all night waiting for a ring. Take it from me, Mrs. Simpson, there's more in this affair than meets the eye!"

Which was a profoundly true remark, though Mr. Hobbs himself has never yet fully appreciated its Solomon-like wisdom.

It is, however, one thing to pose as a domestic, but quite another to be treated as one. Peggy Mainwaring was convinced now that Acting Sergeant Linton, no matter how good-looking and well spoken he might be, suffered from an exaggerated sense of his own importance.

(*To be continued in the February number of* MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE)

THE PILGRIM

TAKE me back home, O East!
Give me thy book to read!
Here hath the glamour ceased;
Teach me thy wider creed!

Lo, I have wandered far;
Lo, I have conned strange lore;
Yet all my learnings are
Less than I lost before.

Deafened by steel on steel,
Blinded by gold on gold,
Straining with useless zeal
Energies manifold—

Wearied, my dazed soul shrinks
Under wide, yearning lids,
Eager before thy sphinx,
Awed at thy pyramids.

Show me thy hidden light!
Give my faint spirit feast!
Prodigal from long flight,
Take me back home, O East!

Nelle Richmond Eberhart

Out of the Chrysalis

A BROADWAY FAVORITE LEARNS A NEEDED LESSON IN A STRANGE SCHOOL OF ACTING

By Reita Lambert

"CUE, Miss Vane!"

"Coming!" Candia Vane tossed the shimmering gold train of her last act costume over her arm, and offered her hand to the man beside her. "You'll come back to the house for supper, Danny—since you can't wait for me?"

He bent over her hand, satin soft and powder-surfaced.

"Naturally, if I can make it," he said. "I must drop in at the Landays'. They've caught an ambassador, or a sheik, or something, and I promised to drop in and deliver my benison."

"But you can get off early, with a right word to the dowager."

"Of course, if it's possible."

"You know it's possible, Danny." She despised herself for her insistence. She had the sense of crowding urgencies, of the inadequate moment before her cue should be spoken, of the specious detachment of her maid, who was fussing about the dressing table, and, above all, of the futility of her ignominious appeal. "You know how little my parties mean without you, dear!"

The call boy's voice outside her door and Daniel Wyndham's reply came to her ears simultaneously:

"Ready, Miss Vane!"

"Make it if I can, Candia. *Au revoir!*"

And she was flying toward her entrance and an absorbed and expectant audience.

The rise and fall of an empire is oddly analogous to the rise and fall of an actress. The same illusion of dazzling spontaneity envelops both when they emerge from obscurity into prominence; the same illusion of startling abruption accompanies their eclipse.

Candia Vane had "leaped into fame overnight," via the dreary and laborious route of her worthy predecessors; but, true to the tradition that yearns toward the startling and spectacular, her arduous pilgrimage was touched upon only lightly by the panegyrics which welcomed her to Broadway. There had followed the customary conjectures as to the permanence of her artistic luster. The question had been comfortably settled by seven brilliant years. Now the title of her newest play did not pretend to compete with the name of its star, and her first nights were a tax upon the superlatives of the critics.

But there were two persons in the theater that night who recognized the almost imperceptible element of legerdemain that had crept into her performance. These were Candia Vane's manager and Candia herself.

Clyde Moore, concealing his always disturbing presence in the shadows of a stage box, his great bulk slumped fretfully against the back wall, watched her through a growing cloud of bewilderment and impatience.

"Wooden, wooden!" he muttered morosely.

He flashed a sharp scrutiny out over the rows of attentive faces beneath him. Not yet—they hadn't discerned it yet. They were still watching her through the bright nimbus that had surrounded her for so many years.

Candia was happily unconscious of her manager's gloomy appraisal. Arrestingly lovely, as always, and speaking her lines with the symphonic resonance that had furnished material for countless eulogies, she felt again, as she had felt so often of late, the unusual tugging at her reserve fund of histrionic force. This was no effortless performance. Not so long ago she had said of her art, with Tennyson:

> I do but sing because I must.

To-night the mellifluent ease with which she generally played was lacking. She seemed to be dragging her speeches across some ragged and arid area within her. Her inadequacy increased with her recognition of it, until, when the falling curtain shut that stirring tide of faces from her view, her body ached and drooped with complete exhaustion.

To the cacophonous medley of the stage hands' voices, the thump of moving scenery, the faint strains of the orchestra's finale, she hurried back to her dressing room—to find her manager slouched on one end of her couch, nervously fingering an unkindled cigarette.

He made a pretext of rising as she entered, but she waved him back and dropped into the chair before her dressing table.

" A nice friendly house to-night," he said casually.

" Yes—very responsive," she replied.

She knew the full measure of the fabricated lethargy that so snugly cloaked Clyde Moore's genial bulk. She knew his vast good nature and abstracted suavity. Long since she had discovered how well this simulation served to conceal the penetrating sapience that was at once his power and his charm.

She waited now for some hint of his object in calling upon her. He was a home-loving creature, addicted to a slippered hearthside existence on his Westchester estate. Broadway seldom saw Clyde Moore after dark. He rose, after a minute, laboriously, having located a stray match in a pocket of his dinner coat.

" Go ahead and dress. Then perhaps you'll let me drive you home."

She gave him a swift, searching glance, which, however, did not penetrate his bland mask of nonchalance.

" Thanks! I shall be delighted, of course. You might tell Louis that I shan't want him to-night." He ambled toward the door. " And, Clyde, you're invited to supper, naturally. We shall all be delighted, in that case."

" All?"

" There'll be some hungry creatures straying in for a morsel of food," she said.

" God forbid!" he said dispassionately. " My digestion won't stand for midnight suppers, thanks!"

As she submitted to the deft ministrations of the plump and florid Swiss who had girdled the world with her, she wondered dully if he had noticed — if those shrewd little eyes of his had pierced her superficially perfect performance to its fraudulent source. When she settled herself beside him in the tufted comfort of his car, she knew that he had.

" Take your time, Jim!" he called lazily through the tube to his chauffeur.

" This is nice of you," she said, and relaxed against the seat, knowing that it was useless to hurry him.

" You're tired, Candia."

She jerked upright impatiently.

" Not at all!"

" Well, then," he drawled, " what is it?"

" Why, why—nothing, Clyde. I'm *not* tired!"

" Then there's only one other thing."

" One other thing!"

" That's potent enough to work its way into an art like yours."

Ah, here it was! She kept her voice nicely unstressed.

" And that is?" She turned her head, and the light from a barrage of street lights picked out his face—round as the full moon, expressionless. " And that is, Clyde?"

" Love," he said.

She knew, before her laugh came, that he would have dissected it for its sincerity, but she accompanied her incredulous ejaculation with a nervous chuckle.

" Good Heavens! In love!"

" I'm not accusing you of larceny," he reminded her blandly. " It's done, you know. You must have read about it. Poets write sonnets to it—' Oh, love of my desire '—and so on."

" Well, let's concede that I'm tired!" she cried.

" Pretty young to be tired," he reflected. " We leave that to my generation. You're —thirty?"

The manager gave the last word a lifting inflection.

" Strictly between us, yes," she admitted ruefully.

" Thirty," he mused, " doesn't get tired, but it occasionally falls in love."

" Not this thirty!" Candia averred with asperity.

" And no harm done, if it's not unrequited," he finished easily.

She lapsed into irritated silence, and gazed out at the myriad colored lights along Broadway. Moore's gentle interrogation roused her.

" Ever been in love, Candia?"

" No—no!"

"That's bad," he said solicitously. "It's like whooping cough and chickenpox—you ought to catch it young. It's hard on adults."

She summoned an air of nonchalance.

"But this is nonsense, Clyde!"

"Nothing is nonsense, my dear child, that can undermine a gift like yours."

"You saw, then?"

"That you weren't top hole—yes. That's why I ran in for a look at your work."

Her voice was edged with alarm now.

"You mean it's beginning to be apparent—that others have noticed, too?"

"Oh, nothing to cause a panic," he said gently. "Your audience doesn't know you're giving them warmed over stuff—yet. If they did, you'd know it, too."

Other private cars and taxis fretted past them. She caught glimpses of pretty women, white shoulders, white shirt fronts, flowers, smiles. She felt the urge of speech, and fumbled bleakly for the right words. She took refuge in sincerity.

"There *is* something the matter with me, Clyde. I'm not tired, exactly—not physically, but—well, you know how easy my work comes, how I love it; and to-night it was like ripping myself apart. If I hadn't known my lines—"

"Candia, you need a rest," the manager suggested. "Summer's almost here. Say the word, and we'll close the show in a fortnight."

"Oh, no, Clyde!"

"Better now than—"

It hung there hideously.

"Am I as bad as that?"

"No, no," he boomed easily; "but you know that an obelisk among molehills is a conspicuous object, my dear. Can't take any chances with a reputation like yours. It's too easy a target for our enemies." He reached across with his great, pudgy hand, and patted her ungloved fingers, quiescent in her lap. "You're too genuine an artist to resort to tricks. A lesser actress might, but you can't afford it."

"Yes," she said dully. "Yes, I know."

The car had been standing at her curb for some minutes. She gathered that what the manager had come to say was disposed of, and offered him her hand.

"Thanks, Clyde. You've been very sweet!"

He climbed toilsomely out and held the tonneau door as she followed.

"Sweet—your grandmother!" he scoffed. "Think it over about that rest. You've earned it."

"Be sure I shall!" she assured him, and hurried across the sidewalk and up the steps of the sedate brownstone house.

Clyde Moore watched her go—a vivid and lovely figure, lighting the dim façade for an instant before the door closed upon it. Then he turned to his chauffeur.

"Step on her, Jimmy, and don't wake me up till you reach the gate!"

II

As Candia let herself into the hall, a medley of gay voices seeped out to her from the drawing-room. Following the blithe informality of her coterie, many of her guests had already arrived.

She stood for a moment, her breath suspended, her head slightly tilted, assorting and identifying the agglomerate voices. Then, with a shrug of self-disgust, she went swiftly upstairs.

Of course, Daniel Wyndham had not come!

She had the sense of having dressed too hurriedly at the theater, a sense of needing to erase possible traces of her encounter with Moore. She knew that festive group downstairs, bless them! She knew that a "top hole" performance was as necessary in her drawing-room as at the theater—more so, perhaps. What queen can stand the searching scrutiny of her own little court?

She let herself into her own sitting room—a dull-toned room with patches of the bright orange that she loved—and hurried on to her bedroom, which she was glad to find deserted, with the bed opened and lights glowing softly. She flung her wrap over a chair back, and fumbled among the phials and jars in her dressing table drawer for rouge and powder and scent. She searched for a feathered fan. There was drama in this, she told herself with a sour little smile, as she went swiftly downstairs.

Her appearance in the doorway of the beautiful old room was, as always, electric. Years of commanding the center of the stage, of awaiting the sharp intake of breath, the smothered exclamation, the patent awe, had lent her the compelling magnetism of all famous back-stage folk.

It was as if the spotlight in which she had moved and spoken for so long had been absorbed, and now emanated from her in a sort of luminous iridescence. The effective movements of her narrow white hands, the lift of her graceful shoulders, the exaggerated clarity of her speech, all so studiously acquired during her apprenticeship in the theater, had unconsciously become part of her.

As she came slowly into the room, her height slightly enhanced by the unbroken line of her dull blue frock, with her glistening brown hair closely coiled after the Grecian manner, she dropped automatically into her stage manner. For a moment of pleased appreciation she held the full attention of her small but select audience before they broke into greeting.

" Here she is, at last!"

" Candia, my love, you're late!"

" Greetings, hostess!"

" Late—yes, but how nicely you've done without me!" she said, and saluted them with her fan.

The accouterment of the spacious, beautifully proportioned room struck a true note of mellow antiquity. Lamps, cunningly contrived from ancient brass and copper urns, glowed on old walnut and Gobelin tapestries, and picked out the half dozen rare canvases on the walls. Her guests were a nice balance of celebrities and adulant satellites. Candia's fluent flow of small talk embraced them all, while her apparently casual inspection made a swift inventory of faces in a search for Daniel Wyndham's.

Suddenly she met the silent, inscrutable observation of Larkin Clerk. His inordinately long, lean figure was lounging against the mantel, and he was tapping a cigarette on his thumb nail. As she met his eyes, a dull flush rode slowly up under her rouge, and an inexplicable irritation pricked her consciousness. Of late, this had been her inevitable reaction to that whimsical scrutiny of his. He seemed forever to be sounding her, prying, measuring.

She swept across to him. He had not put himself out at her entrance, beyond a courtly wave of his long hand.

" Counting, as usual!" she said crossly. " I seem always to see you as a person idly adding up columns of figures, and being cynical over the result!"

" Then you do me an injustice," he said. " Counting takes industry—"

" Or an insatiable appetite for solving problems."

" Ah! Thank you."

She made a little moue, and tapped his shoulder lightly with the feathered fan.

" You're very clever, my friend—a trifle cleverer than I, or I never would have given you that opening. Well, then, we'll concede that I am a problem."

" A charming problem," he smiled. " If you were to marry me, I might stop counting, Candia, dear."

" Ah, indeed!" she laughed, but her eyes narrowed. " You'd never find *that* answer in the back of your book!"

The peal of the bell came faintly from the back of the house. Candia sent a swift glance toward the door, and brought it as swiftly back to the man beside her—to find that, inevitably, he had read her anxiety.

He shook his head slightly.

" It will be old Beale, from the *Review*, looking for a nibble of cake and gossip, or Mrs. Royal with a torn glove from some club meeting."

She cordially hated him now, and knew a primitive impulse to slap him. Instead, with an airy toss of her head, she left him to greet Hardy Barrington, the dramatic critic, fresh from a first night, and horribly depressed.

" What's the stage coming to?" he demanded of the company at large. " Such a play! Threadbare as a missionary's coat! That's not bad—I must remember that." He was a bald, excitable little man, the terror of every young actress in the metropolis. " And the acting—oh, sustain me! Does any one know where I can rent a secondhand street piano, or a peanut stand? I really can't stand much more. No, I'm not punning. Oh, these first nights!"

" You shall have food and sympathy, Hardy," Candia assured him, and patted his hand gently.

She beckoned to the butler, who, with two trim little maids in his wake, was making a round of the room, propelling a small feast on wheels. The groups separated, and shadowy corners were lit by bright silks and white shirt fronts. Abortive sentences met and mingled in a *potpourri* of airy superficialities.

A stream of late comers trickled in after midnight—Carlo di Cinzio from the Metropolitan, petulant and hungry; Stieffel, the composer; Mme. Rouquet, the pianist, with her appealing lisp and accent.

Larkin Clerk, sipping his port and discussing art with a famous but cadaverous

Pole, followed Candia's gracious peregrinations about the room with a brooding anxiety in his nondescript gray eyes. At length he detached himself expertly from the artist's emphatic harangue, and strolled lazily across to her.

"The gods are creatures of variety," he announced ambiguously. "We shouldn't let them have things all their own way!"

He had come softly up behind her, where she was leaning on the piano, and his voice was pitched to reach her ear alone. She moved her head to meet his eyes.

"Now what's underneath that?"

"Since your gods have failed you—" he began, but she broke in sharply.

"Spare me your enigmas, and leave me to complain of my own gods!"

He shrugged resignedly, and gave her one of his wide, engaging smiles.

"Please, ma'am, won't you let me have a word with you?"

"What a pest you are, Larkin!" She strolled off with him, irritated but moved. "And words! You've had volumes of my words!"

"Not enough of the right sort," he said obstinately. "I want you to myself for a moment."

"And now it's moments! The man's a glutton!"

He waved his hand slightly to indicate the chattering groups. His eyes were grave now.

"You've fed them, dear. Send them away, won't you? Or are they so necessary to you?"

For an instant her sporadic thoughts were caught and held by the question. The smile left her lips.

"They're part of me—of my glory—I'm afraid, Larkin."

"No," he said, "they're not. Send them away, and let me prove it."

"And why should I send them away?"

"Because I beg you to," he told her. "You haven't heard my tale for a long time."

"Ah, but I know it, Larkin—that tale of yours!" She laid her fingers gently on his arm. "You must trot along with the rest to-night."

"Spare me that amorphous position," he said lightly. "If I trot along, as you put it, I shall do so under my own impetus. It's cruel of you to lump me with the parade. I thought I had earned a drum or a baton, at least."

"And so you have, my dear," she laughed. "Don't think I lump you so indiscriminately. I don't want to be cruel, but you mustn't ask things of me to-night. I'm taking—not giving."

"And I'm offering," he said promptly, and caught her hand. "You don't want me to say that I love you?"

"No, Larkin, dear, no!" she whispered.

"It wasn't always no, Candia."

She caught her nether lip between her teeth, and turned her eyes away swiftly.

"Oh, I know, I know!"

"I merely wanted to remind you, dear." All trace of ennui and cynicism had left him. "I'm always—just around the corner, you know!"

"And it's a great comfort, Larkin, an—an oasis in all this. You're a dear, reliable creature. I've met hundreds of you in melodramas, but only yourself in reality." She was fumbling nervously with her fan. Now she raised her eyes, and her humility leaped into irritation. "But run along—with your sop, Cerberus!"

He left her with a disturbing mingling of emotions, as always. She had the sense of having been thoroughly read, of having aired all her petty frailties. He knew that she had expected Daniel Wyndham, and knew the measure of her disappointment. She hated him for it, though once Clerk had meant more to her than all else, save her work. That was before she had met Wyndham, the unconquerable!

III

It was after two o'clock before Candia's last guest had gone, and she was left alone with Judith Merson.

Judith, whose official title as secretary and companion to the actress served as an easily adjustable cloak to cover her elastic utility, had for years provided a neat contrast, as well as ballast, for the brilliant and variable Candia. Sallow, flat-bosomed, with a great coil of dull black hair, she was always somewhere in the background, like an inconspicuous piece of furniture that may be lugged out on a moment's notice and metamorphosed into a bed or table as the occasion demands.

From the door of her bedroom, Candia's eyes rested on her companion with a sort of weary impatience.

"If you'd been alive when the walls of Rome were toppling, Judy, I believe you'd have sat calmly at your loom, counting threads—if the Roman ladies *had* looms, and knew how to count!"

Judith looked up gravely from the small square of linen she was overcasting.

"*Are* the walls tumbling, my dear?"

"Do you pretend not to see?"

"I shouldn't think Dan Wyndham's defection such a world-shaking matter."

It was like Judy to bridge all the nicer avenues of approach and land squarely on the field of attack. Candia winced. She preferred her truths padded; but it seemed to-night as if they were piling up about her in all their native ugliness. The withdrawal of her little court left her to face them now through Judy's cool eyes.

"It isn't only Dan," she said quietly; "though why do you suppose he didn't come, Judy?"

"Who — Dan?" Judy's voice was incredulous. "My dear Candia, you *are* amazing! You could answer that question with a dozen speeches from as many of your rôles; though why you should bother to *ask* it—"

"This doesn't happen to be a rôle, Judy."

"No?" barked Judith sharply.

"No!" returned Candia. "Nevertheless, the answer is that he didn't come because I wanted him."

"Because he knew it, my dear," corrected Judy laconically. "Read fiction, and, what's more, history!"

"Oh, it isn't that I don't know what an utter fool I'm making of myself!" Candia cried bitterly. "It isn't that I don't *know!*"

"Well, then?"

"My God, Judy, you're not watching a performance! Can't you see what it's doing to me, to my work?"

"To your vanity!" appended Judy dispassionately, and met the other's furious glare unwaveringly.

"Judy, Judy, do you think me incapable of a genuine emotion?"

"I don't think you love Dan Wyndham, if that's what you mean. He happens to be the only man who hasn't succumbed to your charming machinations. As a consequence, he has acquired a specious value in your estimation." She slipped her thimble off a moist finger, and inspected it gravely. "He's really not worth your best efforts, my dear."

"You still talk as if I were acting, Judy!"

"Well, aren't you?"

"My God, no!"

"I thought you rather fancied yourself in a new rôle," drawled Judith, and began to take the pins out of her heavy, dull hair. Candia watched her bleakly from the tufted, squatty chair into which she had dropped, her resentment engulfed by an overwhelming depression. "I should say, since you've given me this opportunity, that you're snowed under."

"What do you mean by that? Snowed under what?"

"Oh, feathers," Judy said thoughtfully. "Layers and layers of feathers—artifices, poses, glamour. I don't wonder at it, mind. I've often wondered how it could be otherwise, with actresses. I've wondered how they could ever tell reality from illusion, they get so—so caked."

"Are you trying to tell me that I'm—caked, as you put it?"

"The essence may be there. How do I know? How can you tell whether or not it exists, underneath all the theatrical glamour and fame and adulation and luxuries? You can't limit your acting to the stage, when you get to be a celebrity. When *that* happens, you have to play the rôle of what the public thinks you are. Life gets to be just a series of 'big scenes' and 'situations.'"

Judy thoughtfully regarded the hairpins in her thin palm.

"Take Larkin Clerk and Dan Wyndham and—yourself," she went on. "First it was Larkin alone. He was the faithful and unselfish lover, you were the tender but noncommittal heroine. Then along came Dan, and there was your triangle. Dan's not worth the price of his cigarettes, and Larkin's a fine creature; so of course you did the dramatic thing, and fancied yourself in love with Dan. It was a new rôle for you—off stage!"

She had spoken with such dispassionate earnestness that Candia's rising fury found no malicious foil on which to throw itself.

"You think that I'm just an animate bundle of artifices," she summarized dully.

"I didn't say that. I said that the essence was snowed under years of pretense, fabrication. What do you suppose would happen if you were to strip it off? What would you find underneath?"

"Your metaphors are a little confusing, Judy. Strip—"

"Oh, all this!" Judy's long arm went

out and embraced the room with a sweeping gesture. " All these feathers — silks and satins, and Paris models, and limousines—all the pomp your name is encrusted with. Suppose, for example, you were as nude as I—"

" I was once," Candia broke in swiftly; " but the spark was there—or the essence, if you prefer. The pomp is the result of that, and it's still there!"

" Ah, but is it?" asked Judy relentlessly.

Candia's thoughts flew back, at that, to Clyde Moore and her chilling interview with him—back still farther, to her performance that evening. Was Judy right? Was the spark of her genius being smothered—by Judy's so-called feathers?

" Judy," she said slowly, " Clyde Moore told me to-night that I'm either tired or in love. He's only a man, after all, and his conjectures ended there."

" You mean Moore noticed?" broke in Judith sharply.

Candia nodded.

" But you've gone deeper, with your diabolical insight. I may be both of those things, but I'm worse off than either could make me. Clyde has it that I'm resorting to ' tricks.' If what you say is true, I am. When Larkin Clerk asked me to send my party away to-night, I refused. ' Are they so necessary to you?' He asked me that, and it brought me up short with a bump. I told him that they were—that they were part of my glamour. I should have said that they *were* my glamour. They're necessary to me, Judy!"

She paused, but Judy did not speak.

" The worst possible thing happened to me to-night," resumed Candia. " Clyde practically told me that I couldn't act any more; so I came home and let my drawing-room sycophants salve my wounds. By the time they left, I had borrowed another coat of conceit from their homage. You've relieved me of that coat. *Is* there any *me* left—any spark, or whatever it is that got me my electric letters and my place in ' Who's Who '?"

" Well," said Judith reflectively, plaiting the heavy coil of hair that trailed across her breast, " it's an interesting problem. I doubt if you've held your audiences by virtue of your artifices alone, however. Every river has its source."

" Clyde hints that mine is running dry."

" It may be only a temporary drought, after all," Judith suggested with a whimsical smile. " Meanwhile, why don't you do a bit of exploring?"

" Exploring?"

" Shed the feathers, and see what's left."

" But how?"

" Easy!" Judith disposed of obstacles with a flourish of her braid. " Get away for a while."

" As if I hadn't!"

" I don't mean the usual thing — with your retinue and your cortège. Wherever you've gone, these last few years, you've trailed clouds of glory. Don't I know? You can't go shopping without an audience; and you like it." She was quietly argumentative. " I'm suggesting that you shed all that—war paint, retinue, *me*, press blurbs, and so on. Go off somewhere as some one else—as nobody. I'll make you a present of my insignificance, if you like."

" You mean go incognito?"

" Yes," Judy said shortly; " but not even that will help, if you're going to make a drama out of it. Sneak off—"

" Where, where?"

" Oh, anywhere! To some isolated country town, or an island in the Atlantic—some place where the sound of your clarion hasn't penetrated. If you're sincere, you'll do it, Candia. It may be your salvation. I'll stay here and do your chores. I'll even find you a setting for the experiment, if you like."

Silence fell almost tangibly over the room, with its delicate pastels and dim fragrances, the shimmering interfusion of colors and scents making such a perfect background for Candia's slender and iridescent figure, inevitably graceful, even in her brooding depression.

" And if I fail, Judy," she said quietly, " if I go off somewhere, stripped, as you say, with my soul and my body in a shirt waist, and fail to find the essence—if I discover that I'm nothing more than a reflection of the spotlight—"

" But you probably will find it," Judy broke in. " Your wanting to look for it seems to me a manifestation of its presence—if you can get that. I'm sleepy, and not as coherent as I might be."

But Candia's somber gravity did not lift.

" Judy, if I fail, I'm done for; but if, stripped, I can somehow prove to my own satisfaction that my power is a thing apart from my glamour, an intrinsic part of myself, then I shall come back a person, Judy —a person!" Her old vivacity was faintly present in her voice and figure as she rose and faced the apathy that had supplanted Judith's caustic sapience. "I'll have it out with Clyde, and you shall chore for me."

"Funny," Judy observed with a yawn, "how Dan and Larkin have been lost in the shuffle, as it were!"

"Not funny, my dear," Candia said promptly. "To solve one thing is automatically to solve all. I'm shedding Dan and Larkin as I'm shedding everything else. I wonder—"

"Yes?"

Judy flung the reminder over her shoulder, her hand on the knob of the door.

"I wonder," said Candia slowly, "how *they* would like me—without my feathers, Judy!"

"I wonder!" echoed Judy cryptically, as she let herself out.

IV

LYING off the Connecticut shore, an upflung heap of ragged rock and red soil, lies Shipton Island. Candia Vane's tense gaze, bridging the interval of placid blue, picked out its squat white tower, its formless huddle of outbuildings, its arid ribbon of stony beach, with a sort of desperate interest.

Her feet, trim and inconspicuous in their black oxfords, were ankle deep in sand as she stood there awaiting the launching of the dingy little power boat that was to carry her to the island. Behind her lay arid reaches of beach grass, a huddle of weathered fishermen's cottages, and, further inshore, the cluster of shops and houses and church steeples that was the village.

Lobster pots, nondescript skiffs, a beached and battered canoe, dead horse crabs, cluttered the narrow strip of beach on which she stood. Over all hung the pungent odor of fish and drying peach bloom and salt, the whole given voice by the plash and suck of water and the raucous squawk of circling kingfishers.

Pulling and tugging at the little power boat, whose keel had buried itself stubbornly in the sand, was Joel Fuller, son of the light keeper, and Candia's escort. He was a tall, vigorous youth, with gangling brown arms fancifully tattooed between wrist and elbow.

"Get her off in a minute!" he called encouragingly. "If that train hadn't 'a' been late, she'd 'a' been in high water yet; but now the tide's turned."

"No hurry," Candia assured him gently, and was surprised at the perplexed frown in his swift glance.

"Have to hurry, if we don't want to stay beached," he said shortly, and resumed his tugging.

She watched him in silence now. A surly youth, she decided, but a handsome one. When she saw that the craft was afloat, she went across the wet sand toward it.

"It isn't far, is it?" she asked pleasantly.

"Four and a half miles."

She was amazed.

"But it seems so near!"

"It don't," he said succinctly, "when there's a good nor'easter blowin'."

He drew his shirt sleeve across his forehead. His hip high boots were knee deep in water.

"You can hop in now. She's afloat."

Her baggage was already in the bow—two slender suit cases. Joel had made no move to help her, but now, as she hesitated beside the bobbing little craft, he lumbered through the water, keeping one hand on the gunwale, while he offered her the other.

"I'll keep her steady. You better hurry. Tide goes out in no time."

She climbed gingerly aboard.

"Just set amidships," he advised, but she had already collapsed gratefully on the nearest seat—which, it appeared, was the right one.

"I guess you ain't used to boats," he said.

He floundered in after her, bringing a great splash of muddy water with him. Then he turned to the crude little engine in the stern, jerked a cord, and, with a protesting sputter, they leaped away from the shore.

For the first time since her unostentatious exit from New York that morning, an odd terror crept into Candia's composure, threatened her high resolve. All this was the sum of Judith Merson's energetic ingenuity. It was Judith who had plucked the island off the map and ascertained the keeper's willingness to house a boarder. It was Judith whose tireless and determined machinations had corralled the meager wardrobe of a modest-salaried school-teacher. It was Judith who, during those last few days, had constituted herself an invisible panoply against which the persistent importunings of Candia's devoted coterie had beat in vain.

And here she was, erstwhile the spoiled child of international fame, embarking on the most dramatic expedition of her whole career, but sans heraldry, sans pomp, sans audience!

She sat huddled in the dingy little boat, so odorously suggestive of spilled gasoline and oil and fish—a drab enough figure, surely, to satisfy even the exactions of Judith, who had remarked that morning, at the train:

"You are far from pretty without your feathers, my dear!"

A blue serge suit, a nondescript little toque, a tucked shirt waist—these were the sartorial measure of Candia's adopted insignificance. The garb seemed to give visible form to her apprehensions, to rob her of any power with which she might fight off her mounting terror—a terror of the vast and fathomless reaches of water all about her, of the equally vast and fathomless silence.

She spoke desperately:

"Do you live out here all the year?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I should think it would — would get pretty lonely!"

"Oh, no—we keep busy."

"And where do you get your supplies—food and things?"

"From the village. We get two days a week off—if we want it."

His tone implied that they did not often take advantage of that privilege. His eyes, a hard, bright blue, puckered about with innumerable lines from much squinting, had met hers casually in a not unfriendly appraisal; but they carried none of the covert admiration, none of the awed wonder, to which she had become pleasantly inured during the past seven years.

The wind had whipped her closely wound hair from its net, and ragged wisps were blowing unbecomingly about her face. Cleansed of its cosmetics, her skin showed the pallor of too meticulous protection, too little exercise. She was shivering, too, and her lips and nostrils were blue and pinched.

He knew her, this boy, as a Miss Vane, sometime school-teacher, seeking a rest. It was possible that on some rare visit to the theater he had paid his dollar and, from a high perch in the gallery, watched Candia play. He might have thrilled and quivered and adored, and perhaps, as a final fillip to his adventure, he might even have sneaked out to witness her transit from stage door to limousine. This possibility, fused to his patent indifference, lent its dreary color to her morbid introspections, and her terror was succeeded by a gloomy zeal to sound him still further.

"I hope you'll show me the light," she said—"how it works, and all that. I've never seen a lighthouse before."

It was spoken with the wistful inflection, the appealing lift of brows and shoulders, that never failed to bring a responsive throb from her audience; but Joel Fuller, astride the stern of the boat, his hand on the tiller, his eyes idly fixed on his course, nodded matter-of-factly.

"Be glad to," he said readily enough. "It's kerosene—not electric, like most folks think. And the foghorns are clockwork, you know."

The indeterminate outlines of the island were assuming character, as they drew nearer. The tower detached itself from the sprawled outbuildings, and loomed whitely above the pile of scorched sod and rocks. An air of desolation, of thin, bleak solitude —enhanced by the glaring white of house and tower, and by the sparse, nipped foliage that struggled into sporadic bloom above the dunes—hung over the place.

Joel pointed the nose of his sputtering craft into a crudely constructed sluice, silenced his engine with a deft gesture, leaped out, and made the boat fast to a stake. Then he lifted out Candia's suit cases. He did all this in silence—not an unfriendly silence, rather the silence of one unfamiliar with subtle conversational garnishings. When he spoke, it was over his shoulder:

"Get out all right?"

"Oh, yes—thanks!"

She followed him humbly enough up an improvised flight of insecure steps that trickled down the side of a sand dune. The top of the stairway yielded a comprehensive view of the island, an egg-shaped, lumpy bulge; of the tower, no longer squat, but looming straight and tall, sturdy and invincible; of the severe white house; of the outbuildings that housed the machinery, with their protruding foghorns, like great gaping mouths. The whole was fringed about by the narrow, irregular beach, and out and beyond lay the bay, lethargic, silent, save for the distant *put-put* of a fisherman's dory.

Candia followed the easy swing of her escort's figure over a path of chipped flagstones and to a back door overhung by a poorly nourished grape vine. Here her hostess greeted her:

"Well, you got here all right, I see! I'm Mrs. Fuller."

"How do you do?" Candia inquired mechanically.

The woman's eyes, bright and shrewd behind her glasses, had leaped to the suit cases in her son's grasp.

"Take 'em upstairs, Joe. You know—the green room!" She turned to Candia. "I guess you're pretty well tuckered out. I'll show you where your room is."

She led the way, flinging words over her shoulders:

"It's south, this room, the only one the light don't bother none—I mean at night—from the tower."

Their way led through the bare and spotless kitchen and up stairs that were uncarpeted and oiled. The south room proved to be a boxlike little place, scrupulously neat, with walls painted a rich green. It contained a narrow iron bed and a golden oak washstand replete with gayly decorated crockery. The floor was covered with whitish matting.

"Well, here you are!" Mrs. Fuller announced cheerfully. She was a small, spare woman, prim and starched, and with a breezy self-reliance that was almost aggressive. "When you said you was lookin' for a quiet place to rest—in your letters, you know—I said to Joe, Senior: 'Well, this ought to suit her,' I said. 'Nobody could find a place any quieter,' I said."

"I'm sure it's going to be just what I want," Candia managed.

There was more of this, while Candia returned her hostess's well intentioned pleasantries with what grace her failing tact could muster; but at last she was alone, with the green walls and the flowered crockery and the chill chastity of the narrow white bed.

She stood for an agonized moment, fighting the impulse to open the door, to call back her wordless escort, and to demand to be taken ashore. She fell to pacing the floor—an old habit—back and forth, back and forth. It was thus she had memorized her rôles, pacing her boudoir or sitting room, kicking soft rugs impatiently into caterpillars along the baseboard, trailing a length of some impalpable silk or lace behind her.

She paced the little room, her loose-hipped, graceful stride hampered by her narrow serge skirt, paused at the door, her lips pursed to form the word that would admit her defeat, and paced again—back and forth, from the door to the window that so relentlessly framed the vast solitude beyond.

The Fullers had admitted a boarder only with the proviso that she should consider herself "one of the family." For the family supper, at the light, the table was spread in the kitchen, with an unbalanced but nourishing assortment of beans, bacon, hot biscuit, and chocolate cake—the latter evidently a concession to the boarder's presence. The light keeper was, if possible, more silent than his son—a lanky figure, coatless, with the trenched and weathered skin of the seafarer, trailing ragged mustaches in his coffee cup.

After supper, unwilling to face those implacable green walls upstairs, Candia strolled out. She wandered past the paint shed and the weedy stretch of garden to the end of the island. Here she settled gingerly on a huge, sea-washed rock.

She was haggard from her long hours of introspection. Once more she was conscious of the silence that was yet not a silence so much as a ceaseless, imperceptible murmuring of vast, invisible forces—those mysterious machinations that were, even now, easing the red sun into the sea.

The chill of the salt-laden breeze penetrated her serge jacket. She drew it closer about her throat. Even the wind here, she reflected, with a rueful smile of her pinched lips, was sharp, undiluted, sweeping straight from its inexplicable source. Well, she was stripped bare, even as life out here, cut off from the softer civilities, was stripped clean of its frills.

Here were crude, monumental realities, against which her own little triumphs were a puerile candle flame. Or were they? Was not the essence of her genius one with the infinite principle of life? If she had not irrevocably smothered its life-giving potency, would it not rouse again? Was this not her mission—to sound the depths of her being for its existence, and to test its real potency?

The sun had been gulped by a great jagged-jawed cloud. Almost simultaneously with its disappearance, a long arm of light shot out across the gray, undulant hide of the bay—shot out and girdled the island slowly. The dusk had accentuated Candia's sense of isolation. Years that had been crowded with voices, with physical nearnesses, asserted themselves. Her bleak thoughts flew to the well ordered New York house that she had left; to the theater, light, warm, fragrant; to the applause; to Dan Wyndham and Larkin Clerk; and, between these two, to a whole army of lesser admirers conscripted from the liberal ranks of her devotees.

She stood up stiffly, the wind whipping her hair free. Well, she had discarded all that. What was there left?

She faced the tower, a great wraith against the smudged sky, with a single ineffectual eye winking sporadically across the waste of water, necklaced about its throat with a flimsy iron rail. She faced and challenged it! What was it but a *thing*, with an insecure handful of dirt and gravel for its base? Of what use the light, or the silly little houses, if sea and sky cared to assert themselves?

These were feeble things contrived by men. She was one with the sea and sky themselves—one with the great unseen power. She knew it now, and somehow she must prove it.

V

To the uninitiated, life on Shipton's Island is, at best, monotonous. At first, the transition from her crowded days in New York to the uneventful existence at the lighthouse was a sore tax on the energetic Candia. Her physical activities were curtailed to a stroll around the island, which, even at ebb tide, measured little more than a city block.

She had brought with her half a dozen plays in manuscript, among which to search for a possible vehicle for her next production. These still lay at the bottom of her suit case. Her nervous unrest had gradually given place to a melancholy lethargy, and she spent long hours lying on the sunbathed beach, or perched against a rock, engulfed by her desolation.

Most of all, perhaps, she missed the social contacts, the stimulating badinage for which her drawing-room had been famed—the play of wits, the easy reduction of momentous matters to a sapient phrase or two.

She found the Fuller family to be a silent trio, given to terse reflections on purely personal matters.

She was well into her second week when she became aware that the itch and urge of nerves had left her. This was when she began to observe the tranquil but tireless activity about her—when her interest in the daily tasks of the lighthouse had at last been aroused. It was as if she had been looking through binoculars adjusted to another vision, and had picked them up one day to find the blur gone.

Her interest was caught and held by the underlying industry beneath the placid surface of the strange life about her. She was immensely intrigued, for example, by the daily polishing of the shiny brass and copper fixtures about the gigantic light in the tower. She began to look forward, almost with enthusiasm, to the inspection of the lobster pots afloat off the rocks. She would follow the stolid Joel as far as the beach, and would call, as he hauled up the crates:

"How many to-day, Joel?"

When he told her, her face would reflect his triumph or disappointment. Then, too, there were endless—and, at first, meaningless—discussions of fish, of bait, of the paucity or abundance of hermits and shore crabs to be found in the pools at low tide.

"You can't catch snapper blues with crabs!" old Mr. Fuller observed emphatically one day.

Candia found herself wondering enormously over this phenomenon, as over such discoveries as the fact that a desperate lobster will eat its own claw, and that crabs walk sidewise.

Then there was the village gossip brought to the island once or twice a week by Joel. She heard of the dearth of clams, of the death of old Mrs. Landis, grandmother of the county clerk—surely Candia had heard of *him!* Old Cal Page, she learned, had discovered and transplanted oyster spawn, and the costume play for the benefit of the hook and ladder company was being "practiced" every night. All of immense local importance, these items!

Her fear and distaste of the dingy little power boat vanished in the wake of her ennui, and she became Joel's companion on many of his fishing trips. Her jubilation over her first catch was succeeded by sharp disappointment when it developed that the squirming thing on the end of her line was a dogfish, and inedible.

She was conscious, after a few weeks, of a pulsant physical buoyancy, of a renewed rush of vitality—conscious, too, that her cheeks were filling out, and had borrowed a ruddy glow from the sun. Her depression revisited her only on the evenings that she spent in the green room, trying to read, Then she turned her thoughts resolutely away from the past, and dragged them back, by the leash of that same resolution, from the future—from Dan Wyndham and Larkin Clerk, and, above all, from the theater. She was still unproved.

VI

"THERE'S a pretty sou'easter blowin' up," announced Mr. Fuller on an evening in early August, between heavy forkfuls of pancake.

Candia looked up swiftly.

"I had begun to wonder where our fiction writers found their material for sea stories—their whistling gales, and lashing waves, and all that," she said lightly. "The sea has been on its best behavior for me, I suppose."

"The longer she's calm, the worse she is when she goes on a tear," mumbled the light keeper philosophically. "If the wind don't die down with the sun, we'll catch it to-night!"

His prophecy was borne out by the elemental tumult that greeted Candia as she stepped outside the kitchen door. The departure of the sun appeared to have unleashed all the latent fury of wind and water. Great white-topped waves lashed against the rocks and tossed foamy spindrift over the top of the dunes. The violence of the wind sent her hurrying back to the house, her hair cascading about her shoulders, the breath whipped out of her lungs.

She sat long in the dark of the little green room, beside her window, while the house rocked and quivered in the gusty onslaught. She had brought up with her the comforting picture of old Joel Fuller seated placidly beside the kitchen table, his slippered feet on a hassock, an ancient magazine spread in the circle of light, and this reassuring memory companioned her when she slipped into bed.

She would not be afraid, or alone. She was one with the tremendous power outside, and it could not hurt her.

She was wakened by the hum and buzz of suppressed excitement that was manifest, somehow, above the turbulence outside her window. She crawled swiftly out of bed, and stood for a moment at the window. The slowly girdling arm of light lit her view for an instant, and showed her such a picture of storm that it gave her fear feverish activity. She dressed hurriedly, and, with her hair still trailing its heavy braid down her back, slipped down the stairs and into the kitchen.

The lamp was still glowing on the table, picking out the neat red and white pattern; but a fresh fire had been kindled in the range, and the kettle was steaming. The air was fragrant with aroma of freshly boiling coffee.

Old Joel Fuller, booted to the hips, stood over against the sideboard. In one hand he had a huge mug of coffee; the other rested on the arm of a man strange to Candia—a tall, angular young man, brown as the light keeper himself.

The stranger was wrapped from chin to heels in a dingy bathrobe, and thick tufts of dark hair stood up in a forest on his head. His mouth was working uselessly as Mr. Fuller talked.

"It's no use—you know that, Lyle," the light keeper was saying. "How could anything as little as that live in this? You might as well try and see it that way. Drink your coffee, man!"

It was then that Candia saw a woman crouched before the fire, with Mrs. Fuller bending over her. She was young, with a dark, thin face and strong, freckled arms. Her hands were moving in aimless unrest over her throat.

Candia stepped forward swiftly.

"Oh, Mrs. Fuller, has there been an accident? Is there something I can do?"

Mrs. Fuller shook her head. Her lips were pursed, and she laid a finger on them with a quick, warning gesture.

"Joel's out there—doin' what he can. It 'll come dawn, soon."

The woman before the fire spoke dully:

"I must go—she'll be hungry."

"Now, now!" soothed Mrs. Fuller, and took possession of those restless hands. "Joe'll look after her, Mis' Jacobs." She raised her eyes to Candia's, and her lips formed a word: "Baby!"

It was a long moment before Candia comprehended the mute sign. Her eyes were fastened in confused horror on the woman's hair, which straggled about her face in uneven tufts, as if it had been crudely hacked with a blunt knife.

Understanding came gradually — this woman had been in a wreck, and her baby was lost. It was her baby who might be hungry—a baby out in this weather! Joel was out there looking for it, and they were waiting for the dawn.

Candia's horror vented itself in a shrill, involuntary cry:

"Oh, oh! Let me—"

But Mrs. Fuller silenced her.

"Hush! Can't you see?"

She pointed over Candia's shoulder.

Joel had come silently in, through the hall, that the outside tumult might not disturb that tragic pair, and move them anew to their sense of loss. In an instant, Candia was beside him.

"Oh, Joel, tell me—the baby!"

He drew the cuff of his oilskin sleeve across his streaming face.

"It's no use. It was gone long before we got to 'em. She'd 'a' gone, too"—he pointed to the figure before the fire—"but her hair was wrapped around the mast, tight as rope. We had to cut it off."

Candia had the sensation, now, of some absorbed spectator watching some preposterous melodrama, listening to preposterous lines.

"You mean—you think the baby was drowned?"

He nodded gravely.

"Oh, no!"

"Drowned before we reached 'em," he said. "I been looking for the body, but you can't see much till dawn."

"Who are they! Why were they out?"

"Lyle Jacobs and his wife—fisherman in the village, you know. He started out under sail, before it blew up. He'd 'a' got back all right, even then, if his motor hadn't gone out of business. He's been caught in worse seas than this, and made shore all right. He had his wife along"—Joel shrugged—"and women are queer in a boat."

He paused to take the cup of coffee that his father offered him. Candia accepted hers mechanically. The bereft fisherman was slumped in a chair, his face in his great hairy hands.

"She's gone sort of crazy," Joel whispered, nodding toward the mother. "She can't understand that the baby's been drowned. She still thinks it's somewhere here on the island, and she wants to go out and look for it."

The little bright, warm kitchen, wrapped about with the ominous roar of wind and surf, had taken on a nebulous unreality—the gripping, chilly unreality of a dream vision. Silence fell, broken only by the smothered sobs of the fisherman and the solicitous drawl of the light keeper's voice. And when the black drop outside the windows lifted, Candia knew that they had all been waiting for the dawn.

VII

The sky was a muddy gray when Candia followed Joel outside, with a cape of Mrs. Fuller's flung over her shoulders. The wind was dropping, though the surf still sprayed its spindrift shoulder high. Across the eastern horizon, a pale pink ribbon heralded the sun.

Along the edge of the dunes they picked their way, peering down at the littered, wave-washed beach, and stooping now and again to inspect bits of wreckage strewn along the foot of the dunes.

"You better go in where it's warmer," Joel advised once, over his shoulder.

Candia shook her head, and marveled that in August one should shiver. The gray was lifting rapidly, and the eastern clouds were riotous with color.

Halfway around the island they came face to face with the others—a tragic procession, headed by the bereaved young mother. Candia stood at gaze for a moment, held by the bleak tragedy of the woman's figure as she moved with a certain stolid grace along the dunes. Her face was arrestingly calm. Her eyes, wide and dry, peered down at the water or stared with a sort of listening intensity across toward the mainland.

Beside her walked the husband, still in his flapping bathrobe, with tears rolling unheeded over his brown cheeks, and a hopeless droop to his powerful shoulders. Close behind came the light keeper and his wife, the latter weeping softly. Mr. Fuller stopped his son, but not to question him.

"You better go look after the lamp," he said. "She was so set on lookin' around, we thought it 'd be best to let her. I'll take 'em across to the mainland after breakfast, and tow in their boat."

But Candia was rushing toward the house—toward the homely reassurance of those green walls. Here was drama, she reflected grimly—drama also stripped of its glamour, of its "happy ending."

She washed, dressed her hair, and then sat waiting to hear the chug of the power boat that would carry the unhappy principals of this stark tragedy back to the shore. When at last she heard it, she went down, conscious now of a gnawing hunger, a devastating weakness—to find the dry-eyed mother sitting once more in the chair before the fire.

Mrs. Fuller met her boarder at the door, a finger on her lips to enjoin silence.

"Her husband's gone across to bring back a doctor. She wouldn't go. They couldn't budge her, she was that set. It's like she's lost her mind as well as her baby!"

"But surely, surely, she must know by now that it's hopeless!"

"You can't seem to make her understand. She ain't cried, even. I can't keep her in the house for more than five minutes at a time. She will walk and walk, around and around."

"But she may drown herself!" Candia cried.

"No—that don't seem to enter her head. She just stares along the beach—as wild as anything, she looks, and *awful!*"

All morning Candia watched that tragic figure from her window. Again and again the woman circled the island, with hair streaming like that of some fantastic savage about her face.

Before noon the doctor came, over a sea as placid and guileless as a lazy pool. Half an hour later Candia saw him leave, only Joel going with him. She watched the little boat cough itself out of the slip, and the consciousness of her own ineffectuality added its weight to her horror as she went downstairs again.

"She wouldn't go," Mrs. Fuller told her. "The doctor says it's better not to force her. He says the shock and everything has sort of crazed her. She's stopped sufferin', you see, and that's bad. He says if she wakes up, and realizes what has happened, she may fight it out and get all right again." She lowered her voice. "Personally—well, *I* think she's gone—her mind, you know!"

"But we must *do* something!" cried Candia, her voice edged with irritation, incredulity, and a very real anguish. "We must *do* something!"

Mrs. Fuller's eyes widened helplessly.

"But there's nothing we can do for the poor soul. If her mind has gone, maybe it's just as well—not to *have* to suffer, you know."

Throughout the afternoon Candia kept to her room. She kept as much as possible away from the window which framed, so often and so inevitably, the picture of the tireless mother. The horror of it grew with the hours.

"I think she's gone!" the light keeper's wife had said.

Gone! Another spark snuffed out! Candia could see the gentle, stolid pair downstairs, inured to the inexplicable mutations of life, already resigned to the hopelessness of the situation. No doubt they accepted it as they accepted everything else, with a sort of fatalistic apathy. They did nothing—they just sat back and let things take their course.

Candia stood it until late afternoon, when she swept with a reckless desperation into the kitchen. The door stood open to the pellucid clarity of sea and sky. Beneath the patches of shade cast by the grape vine sat Joel, whittling a block of wood for a lobster float. Beside him was the young fisherman, his head again in his cupped hands. Mr. Fuller, slippered and at ease with his magazine, was beside the table. Their crazed guest had been brought in, for perhaps the twentieth time, and Mrs. Fuller had drawn a chair to the couch on which she lay. Over all lay the hush of death.

Candia surveyed the scene from the doorway. Then she swept across the room to the light keeper's wife.

"Are things still the same with her?"

At the crisp, clear voice the woman on the couch stirred, and a perplexed frown appeared between her eyes. Mrs. Fuller raised an admonishing hand, but Candia did not lower her voice.

"You're just letting her slip away, don't you see? We must rouse her!"

"Hush! The poor soul—she might hear you!" whispered Mrs. Fuller frantically. "She may understand you!"

"She shall! I'm going to make her! Can't *you* understand? She is protecting herself, unconsciously, from suffering. You say the doctor says she must wake up. Well, I shall awake her!"

"But, Miss Vane, how can you—"

The unfamiliar and determined voice seemed to penetrate through the unresponsive layers with which the mother's consciousness had wrapped itself. She sat up. Mr. Fuller was staring with amazed disapproval over his glasses. Joel and the dazed fisherman had drawn nearer the door.

"It's wicked, it's criminal!" Candia cried, and took firm hold of the woman's arm. "Mrs. Jacobs, get up! Come out here! I want to talk with you."

"But, Miss Vane, you mustn't! How can you be so cruel?"

"Cruel! It's you who are cruel! Oh, you don't mean to be! *I'm* trying to be kind. Come, Mrs. Jacobs!"

The woman was moving mechanically at her side. The others followed dazedly. As she passed the distraught husband, Candia met his eyes bent upon her in smoldering anger. She spoke gently.

"Believe me, Mr. Jacobs, I'm not going to hurt her any more than I can help. You love her, don't you? You want her restored? Well, then—"

VIII

THE woman had wandered off toward the beach. Candia hurried after her and took her arm firmly.

"I must go, I must look for her!" she was saying dully.

"Well, then, *look!*" Candia cried, and waved an arm toward the beach. "Look out there—at those rocks—that's where your boat beat itself to pieces last night. You see them, don't you? Horrid rocks, death-dealing! Look straight at them!"

The woman followed that steadily pointing finger with her wide, unseeing eyes.

"Look!" Candia repeated clearly. "Think of those rocks, and of your boat beating against them last night. You remember! Your baby was in your arms, and now she has gone—*gone,* do you understand? You *shall* understand!" She threw a question over her shoulder toward the huddled group behind her. "What was the baby's name?"

"Elsie," the fisherman said.

"Ah, my little Elsie!" wailed his wife suddenly.

Candia whirled on her.

"Elsie is dead, Mrs. Jacobs! She has gone! Don't you remember when your boat foundered last night? Well, she has gone. Elsie has gone, but you still have Lyle. He loves you, he *needs* you. He's your husband!"

She had taken the two strong, freckled hands in her own, and she impaled the woman's glance with her own. Her voice dropped to a low, impassioned appeal, with all the force of her vicarious agony:

"Look at me, Mrs. Jacobs! No—at *me!* Your baby has gone, so why look out to sea? You're needed here by your husband. It's weak to let yourself go like this! You are young, with life before you, and your duty—your duty lies here, my dear, with your husband and the other baby—the baby who is coming! Who will nurse *that* baby?"

The thin, dark face was puckered now, and the eyes were squinting in perplexed, agonized bewilderment. Near by stood the quartet of onlookers, a fantastic group against the dun sand and the fading blue sky. Candia had forgotten them, had forgotten everything but the woman before her and her own determination to bring understanding back into those wide, tearless eyes.

A plain enough figure in her white shirt waist and linen skirt, her hair whipping about her cheeks, she yet seemed to emanate some strange inner glow. Her voice was full, round, resonant, compelling.

"Ah, my dear, you must suffer! You're *going* to suffer for Elsie, but to suffer is to take a step toward your reward! We all have to suffer—it is part of life. We can't shut ourselves up from it—that's weakness, and you are not going to be weak, because your husband needs you, and so does your baby—the little baby who's coming to you to comfort you! You're not the only woman who has had to suffer. Jesus died on the cross, and Mary, His mother, had to watch His death agony—don't you remember? He died—but it was for a great purpose. Your baby died, and some day you will know why!"

A pulsant triumph was in Candia's voice now, and a startled awe had replaced the fear on those four staring faces behind her, for the woman's eyes were no longer staring unseeingly before her. They were fixed with a dreadful intensity on the young, exalted face before her, and her lips were working in convulsive spasms.

Candia's voice lifted again—unwavering, clear:

"Weep, my dear—weep for your dear dead baby! When you have wept for her, turn your thoughts to that other baby—the little unborn soul that is going to need its mother. Be thankful that your Elsie has gone. Know that it was for a purpose—perhaps to save her from the very agony that you are suffering, perhaps to save her from worse. Think of your husband, too. He needs you—"

A great cry broke from the woman's throat:

"My baby! Oh, God, my baby!"

"Weep! Suffer!" cried Candia. "Your baby is gone—your Elsie—but your husband—it is breaking his heart! See, he is weeping, too, and he needs you—his wife. Lyle *needs* you, Mrs. Jacobs—go to him!"

The woman's grotesquely clipped head followed Candia's eyes, and her bewildered gaze came to rest on her husband's haggard and grief-contorted face. She moved toward him with the fitful, spasmodic stride of a person newly awakened. A yard from him she paused, and then, with a low moan of compassion, she flung herself into his arms.

"Oh, Lyle, my dear, my dear — Lyle, darling, don't take on, don't cry! Maybe it's all for the best—and we've got to be brave for the other baby's sake, Lyle!"

Not until she saw the tears on that dark, thin face did Candia withdraw her gaze. Her eyes flew to the trio still standing at gaze behind her, and she went to them across the sand.

"Tears, tears, and more tears!" she cried, touching each face lightly in turn. Then she raised her hand and drew it across her own wet face. "You see, it's all right! She's quite all right!"

She said it lightly, almost hysterically, but Mrs. Fuller's voice, when she spoke, was oddly muffled. She laid a hand gingerly on Candia's arm.

"How—how did you do it? It was terrible—and wonderful, somehow. How did you do it?"

Candia was trembling. The reaction had come, but her eyes were luminous.

"Why, I don't exactly know," she said. "I just felt that I *had* to. Almost any woman may be brought back, I think, even from the very grave, if she can be made to feel that some one needs her."

"But how did you know that? It was all so queer, somehow—almost like a play!"

A play! Candia lifted her face, and her eyes caught the iridescent reflections of the setting sun on the water. A play! The words had come like a benediction. It was the spark—the divine spark, kindled to flame anew—the spark that was one with the immortal, elemental facts about her!

IX

"So you see how it was, dear!" Candia fastened her earnest gaze on Larkin Clerk's attentive face. "I thought there was nothing left of me, save my glamour—and that I borrowed from the people and things around me. My feathers, Judy called it."

"So you shed the feathers," helped Clerk, and gave the trim, severely plain figure before him a grave inspection.

"I shed them," she said, "and I came out here, where I had to compete with realities. That was the trouble, you see. I got them so hopelessly mixed up—the real and the imitation. Now I can *see!*"

"Yet your eyes are playing tricks, looking out of the back of your head somewhere, when they *seem* to be looking at me! But you can't escape me. You sent for me—you said you had a message. If you knew the trouble I had getting across—"

"Why!" Candia's brows went up. "A message! But I've told you!"

"Oh, indeed!"

"Why, yes, I've been trying to tell you ever since you landed here an hour ago! I've learned so much that I was one with all this!" She waved her brown hand across the blue expanse beneath them. "That you and your love were one with it and with me! That feathers or lack of feathers make no real difference." She threw back her head, her two hands on his shoulders. "You love me, Larkin, don't you — even stripped and plain as I am, without my feathers?"

"My dear Candia! My poor conscientious lamb! Don't you realize that the real you wears her feathers inside?"

"Well, then"—she relaxed against him with a great sigh—"tell me your story, Larkin—your regular story. I'm waiting, dear!"

BOND AND FREE

Ours is a prison wider far
Than the orbit of a star;
Freer than the wind we rove
Who are subtly chained by love.

We who in love's fetters live
Would no more be fugitive;
And with joy alone they smart
Who are prisoners of the heart.

T. Morris Longstreth

The Solid Thing

THE STORY OF A FINE OLD FIREMAN WHO COULDN'T BE ANYTHING ELSE

By Ralph E. Mooney

THE landslide is distinctly an American institution. Futile things called avalanches have been noticed elsewhere, upon occasion, but nothing has been reported which may be compared with the huge, hysterical landslide of American politics. There was one in 1912, and there was another in 1920. The last-mentioned brought about the things with which we are to deal—among other things, of course.

In 1920 the political situation in the city of St. Francis underwent a change. The city had always been Republican, but the landslide caused a shift in the balance of power. Swingdon, the commissioner of public safety, went out of office, being a supporter of the wrong Republican. Donald replaced him.

Shortly afterward—politically speaking, that is, for if art is long, politics is longer—shortly afterward, the new commissioner of public safety sat squinting over his desk. A young, dapper, and self-confident man was before him.

"He's finished," averred Donald, the commissioner. "He's finished now. He hasn't a friend to support him. What is one man against a hundred?"

"Nothing, I guess," replied the young, dapper, and self-confident man.

"Then you are appointed if I can count on you. You see, Lansdow, when a man like me gets somewhere, he has got to build his own organization, or he don't stay there. Now, I know you can handle the job. There's a little to it. A chief is merely a symbol. Can I count on you?"

The young, dapper man named Lansdow grinned.

"I guess so," he wavered.

Another victim was marked for the landslide. These men who were riding its crest meant to put the man without a friend underneath. He would be buried, and would never be heard from again. What was one man against a hundred?

At the risk of pointing a tiresome moral, let us consider the question. What is one against a hundred? Nothing, as Lansdow said; and yet it is wrong to figure in terms of men only. There is another factor. In addition to the man, there is always the man's work. He may be fragile, but twenty-five years of endeavor may constitute a solid thing that a hundred men or a thousand may not molest — a thing that even a landslide cannot affect.

II

THERE was a click of heels on the marble of the City Hall, and the fire chief came into his office. He went directly to the window and squinted at the little park outside, where rain was pelting into the sooty remains of snow heaps and driving thin trickles of mud across the sidewalks. The nape of his neck bulged red and ominous over his collar. His breath came in rapid, furious gasps.

The fire chief's private secretary trembled, vividly aware of the red, bulging neck. He was fairly certain that he was not at fault, but that was no consolation. The fire chief, James Burr—sometimes known as Jumping Jimmy—made of his anger a hurricane with a generous danger zone.

The secretary knew that the men in the outer office were nervous, too. With pained cheerfulness, he reflected upon the fact that before long the epidemic would probably spread to the district offices and the engine houses.

The chief turned.

"Take a letter, Mike," he commanded.

The secretary's hand was lifted to his notebook as the words were spoken.

" 'To the commissioner of public safety, City Hall, St. Francis,' " began the chief. "That's the address. This is the letter."

He paused for a moment, glaring at Mike rancorously. Then he flung his message at the secretary's carefully lowered head.

" 'Sir, this is in line with our conversation of just now, which I want to confirm. You had the damned '—no, Mike—'you informed me that I was to take twenty days' vacation and then resign, so as to let your dirty stool pigeon Lansdow take the place' —no, Mike—'take twenty days' vacation and then resign my post as chief of the Fire Department. I told you that if that was what you were after, you could have my resignation now, without any vacation, and you could go to hell. I meant it. I do hereby resign from my post, and you can go to hell.' Now, write that, quick!"

The chief turned away with an intentional rudeness that was meant for the commissioner of public safety. Mike fed paper into his typewriter, and rapidly tapped off the matter preliminary to the letter. Then he stopped, and was quiet for so long that Chief Burr faced around irritably, intending to blast him into action.

When the chief saw Mike, however, he became shamefaced, and went to the window again. The secretary was staring blindly at his paper and was shivering. Mike had been with the chief for six years.

At last there came a feeble clicking of type bars.

"Hurry up!" growled Burr.

The clicking gained vehemence and came to an end. The secretary walked to the chief's desk and placed the letter upon it for signature. Then he went on, avoiding his superior's eye, and took his place by the window.

The chief seated himself and perused the script. His dictation had been altered judiciously, and this was what he read:

SIR:

This will confirm our conversation of this afternoon. You instructed me that I was to take twenty days' vacation and then present my resignation as chief of the Fire Department. I told you that you could have my resignation at once. This holds good. I hereby resign from the post hereinbefore mentioned, and this is final.

"Good!" rasped the chief. "You're the best secretary I ever had!"

He signed the letter.

"Now, take a statement to the press," he directed.

Mike hastened to his seat. Chief Burr arose and patrolled the floor for a moment. He despised newspaper men. They were always under his feet. They had a way of coming at him when he was putting his whole mind on the matter of a tottering wall. They would ask him who owned the building, and what was the probable loss.

"Statement to the press," he repeated savagely. "Here it is: 'I have nothing to say.' Take that, make a copy for every newspaper, and send it to them. Sign my name. If any reporters come to you, tell 'em I said—I said—"

"Go to hell," supplied the secretary.

"Yes, the whole damned lot of them!" finished Burr.

The type plopped sonorously for a moment as Mike transcribed the brief message with five carbons in his machine. Then the office was silent, except for a faint bustle from the neighborhood of the chief. When Mike looked up again, the middle-aged firebrand had collected a little heap of personal belongings on his desk, and was making ready to wrap them with an old newspaper.

Mike arose and went to the chief. He put out his hand awkwardly.

"They got away with it," he said.

Burr uttered a growl.

"Donald and Lansdow did," he replied. "They did it between them. Politics, of course—and I always said politics would never lick me!"

"Well, and it hasn't now," cried Mike, in sudden joy. "Listen! They can't do this. It isn't like you was just a politician yourself. Everybody knows you got the goods."

"Hell!" sneered Burr. "Does the public care who is fire chief? Does any party man care? Of course not! It ain't politics to care."

Among other things, the chief hated politics. He would greatly have enjoyed a city without politics, where firemen could attend to their jobs and not have to beg for equipment and salary.

"The mayor is backing Donald," declared Mike thoughtfully.

"Of course, and Stilwell is behind him."

"Well," thrilled Mike, "we can go over Stilwell's head. We can go to Brookins."

Mike mentioned the name with awe. Brookins was the political dictator of St. Francis. Stilwell was party boss, but Brookins was a millionaire who made bosses, and who, at times, would put as much as forty thousand dollars into the campaign fund. In spite of this, Chief Burr growled fiercely at the man's mere name.

"I hate him!" he snarled. "The big robber! I hate him and all his money, and I've told him so!"

Mike collapsed.

"But it ain't right," he moaned feebly.

"No, it's politics," replied Burr. "Now, maybe you better go home. It's five o'clock. There'll be a new chief here after midnight, Donald says, so you work hard and try and stick with him if you can. Maybe they'll let you."

"No!" snapped Mike, catching up his hat and coat. "I'd go in the Street Department first."

He departed reluctantly.

"If only you hadn't made so many enemies!" he mourned as he stood in the doorway. "If you'd only tried to get more friends!"

Chief Burr's pressure rose several points.

"I'm glad of it," he fumed. "You can take it from me, as the last thing I said here, that I wouldn't lick any man's boots for anything he could give me. I'm a fireman, damn it all—just a fireman; and if that ain't what they want—"

"I know, chief," interrupted Mike. "Good-by!"

III

LEFT alone, Burr continued the sulphurous arrangement of his belongings. He was, in a way, numb to the extent of the catastrophe which the new city administration had forced upon him.

The chief had been in the Fire Department throughout a twenty-five-year climb from the ranks, and twenty-five years of habit mercifully prevented him from realizing that he had suddenly been removed from it. Men could put the old fury out of office, but they couldn't stop him being fire chief in heart and mind. When a man is able to smell a possible back draft where other men smell smoke, resignations and appointments have little effect upon him.

As Burr was finishing with his parcel, the alarm tapped five — two — eleven. The chief straightened, looking gravely toward the telegraph. The box from which the signal came was in the ninth district, half a block from the Northern Ice Company's largest plant. McGillicuddy, of Company 21, was a good captain, but he was hasty. He might lose a couple of his best men from ammonia fumes.

The chief hurried over to the municipal telephone.

"What is it, Ed?" he growled.

"They're calling now," was his answer. "Wait a minute. McGillicuddy says it's a shed. He'll get it with city water."

"It ain't in the ice plant?" demanded the chief.

"No—it's across the street."

Burr sighed in relief. He was about to relinquish the telephone when the telegraph man spoke wistfully:

"Gee, chief, I wish it was a big one! A big one would show 'em something. They wouldn't let you go if there was a big one to-day."

Burr mumbled half pleasantly, half ferociously, to Ed, and set down the telephone. He became aware of a freckled young man standing near the secretary's desk.

"Chief, you remember me," greeted the youngster. "I'm with the *Star*."

Burr's eyes gleamed dangerously.

"I've got nothing to say," he barked.

"But I have, chief. You're an old sorehead, and we know it. We're not going to let you do this. We're not going to let them put it over. You'll think better of the newspaper men before long."

"Sorehead?"

Burr's fists doubled.

"Hold it, chief!" said the reporter, backing away hastily. "You hit me once, but never again! Remember what I told you. We'll make you chief again in three days' time."

"Don't you try it," howled Burr. "You newspapers mind your own business, and I'll mind mine. I don't want the damned job. I'll go somewhere else!"

The reporter retired, blown out of the room. Burr picked up his parcel and walked slowly toward the outer office. There were two men out there to whom he must say good-by. He calmed himself to say it pleasantly. They were good boys, though one of them was just a stenographer who had never answered an alarm.

He stopped for a minute, and looked with awe at the empty surface of his desk. The whole room seemed queer — empty. His rugged body was shaken by a tremor. He lowered his eyes, and a choking sound came from his throat.

"Oh, God," he admitted, "I do want the job! I don't want to go somewhere else!"

Partly broken, partly dazed, he hugged his bundle up under his arm and went away.

IV

A CORPORATION, it has been said, has no soul. City affairs are corporate. The moves for the replacement of Chief Burr were carried to completion coolly and dispassionately. Verbal instructions of the commissioner of public safety were confirmed by written orders. At midnight, District Chief Lansdow, young, dapper, and self-confident, took charge of the office.

Next day and the day after, Chief Burr remained at home. His numbness had returned, and he felt a strange, dreamy carelessness of the passage of time. He read the newspapers, wrinkling his nose in scorn. As the reporter had promised, they were fighting vigorously for him, but their energies were wasted. They were battling against a machine, attempting to defy the inevitable.

Occasionally he was conscious of a grateful ease, a freedom from responsibility. At such times he would lay mirthful plans for hunting trips and repairs to his house—things long postponed. As the hours passed, however, he became conscious of pain—pain not wholly mental, but a live, nervous aching that seemed to arise near his stomach and spread over his whole body.

During the night after his second day of absence from duty, he sprang wildly from bed and struggled into his clothing. He was fully dressed before he realized that he was merely acting in accordance with habit. The telegraph signal had not been removed from his home, and was still operating. He had answered a call from the second district. It must have been his nerves, because the second district was not an important one.

Even as he puzzled over the matter, there came the single clang which meant that the trouble was disposed of. He undressed, chiding himself.

His movements were slow and clumsy, and the pain that possessed him grew more acute. It was strong enough to prevent sleep, so he tossed throughout the night.

Feverish worries tortured him. Suppose that a fire broke out in the old factory at Ninth and Warren, and that Lansdow tried to use the plug at the corner? He would lose a whole outfit. Ten to one, he would lose old McGinnis, the best engineer in the department. McGinnis would never leave an engine—not for all hell! He would stay put when brick chips were flying around him like bullets. Burr had seen him at it.

A March wind was rising, tugging at the shutters and whistling shrilly over the housetops. Each heavy puff brought the chief halfway out of bed. He knew these winds. They would make spray of the two-and-one-half-inch streams from the older engines. They would grab hold of a blaze down in the third, and would wipe out a whole block with it.

It was freezing weather, too. With the realization, Burr sat up in bed, staring desperately toward the rattling windows. Great Heavens, if the boys had to go out on such a night, Lansdow wouldn't take care of them! He'd kill them off like flies!

Martin O'Brien, of No. 5, persisted in coming to fires in his undershirt, because he wouldn't let anybody else drive out of the engine house before him. Lansdow would never notice that and make Martin go back and put on his shirt—of course not!

"It isn't right," groaned Burr, in sudden fury. "He won't look after those boys!"

Tears came as he recalled half a dozen brawny favorites who needed watching. Then, with a snarl, he drove the water away with his fist and settled back—to toss and mutter, and sometimes to drive away tears again.

In the morning he rose early and made his own breakfast in the chilly kitchen of his home. His wife came down to expostulate; but, as he mumbled surly excuses, she perceived the haunted look in his eyes, and left him. He fled from the house soon after, for he couldn't stay within hearing of the telegraph bell.

The wind boomed and roared and buffeted him. Struggling with it, he was more at ease, for there was some joy in activity. Still, he felt queer. Sometimes it was like dreaming, and he would go along hearing the rasp of engine exhausts, the roar of flame, and the pounding of streams of water. Then he would suddenly realize that it was all imagination, and he would look wistfully about him into the swirling air, wondering what could make such things happen.

He couldn't resist the force that drew him to an engine house—No. 14, a mile or so from his home. He couldn't resist it, but soon enough he wished he had. The boys acted like children, dragging out half a dozen chairs for him wherever he moved, calling the captain in from his desk, and making a sort of wake over their dethroned chief. Burr didn't like that.

Still less did he like to hear them blaspheming duty and discipline, saying that they'd go on strike for him if he gave the word, or that they'd slack on some big job and show up Lansdow for a fool. Crack-brained Callahan, who handled the rear wheel on the ladder truck, did more than make threats.

"Chief," he whispered darkly, regardless of the fact that the whole company was listening, "chief, let me send for Manny Cronheim."

"Send for him?" asked Burr. "What for?"

"Listen!" confided Callahan. "You remember him? He's a kike that had a loft down on Second Street. You walked in there one day, and you saw where he had been doing something—he won't say even now what it was—something with candle wax and gunpowder along the rafters. Well, you called the turn on him, and told him that if he ever had a fire you'd see him sent to the penitentiary before the ashes was cold. Well, chief, you called him then, and for a time he was sore. He'd stocked up heavy, so as to have a big inventory for the fire, see? Well, he had to sell his stuff after you called him—and he did it, and made a wad, and now he's going around swearing by you—on the level. Well, last night I was talking to Manny Cronheim about the dirty deal they give you, and Manny says to me that a big fire will show up this Lansdow.

"'A big fire,' he says, in so many words, 'will show them what they are losing!'

"He says there ain't nobody knows the trick he was fixing down there but him and you, and, he says, it's a sure thing. If he was to pull it up in the Rickard Building, where he is now, he says he could shoot off his fireworks in broad daylight and nobody would tumble; and it would make a fire that would turn Lansdow inside out, because it's a good bet he's never even noticed the old Rickard Building. He didn't ever inspect any except the fireproof ones on Olive Street, where the bank presidents could see him and give him credit for working. And—well, why not, chief?"

The circle of firemen eyed the old man hopefully.

"Yeah, why not?" asked Callahan's driver. "We could fix it with every company to put all their rotten hose in somewhere, and then we'd have a lot of busted hose. The papers would yell about the bad condition of the department, and Donald would have to can him!"

"D'ye mean," rasped Burr, "d'ye mean why not go ahead and let this Manny Cronheim burn the old Rickard Building—just fer me?"

"Sure!" assented Callahan. "We can frame it to make Lansdow look like the biggest rube in the country!"

For a moment, Burr was confused. The plan did seem feasible. The sudden glimpse of hope was blinding; but not for long. The corners of his lips drew down.

"What?" he expostulated. "Burn the Rickard Building, with wooden stairways and one piece of latticework that they call a fire escape? Why, there's three hundred people working on the top floors, where the imitation typewriter letter company has its place, and you'd kill half of them, just to get one man a job! Not to think of what that stool pigeon would do to you. He wouldn't have any more sense than to send you up there."

The firemen stood back abashed, like so many disappointed boys. Burr arose suddenly and stalked to the door.

"Don't think of it," he warned finally, in an odd, breaking voice. "Don't think of it. If I hear of a fire there, I'll come and break every one of your fool heads!" He struggled to speak for a moment, and then flung a raucous whisper at them. "Damn your souls! You'd do it if I said so—I know you would! Damn you, I ain't worth it!"

V

He left them and walked furiously for a long time, because the pain that possessed him had become more tearing than ever. The boys had made him realize that he was leaving them. That wouldn't have made any difference to Lansdow, but the old chief was a real chief. He felt just as much grief as a good army captain feels when he is at the front, and sees his crack company break up into light-hearted skirmish formations.

Talk of the Rickard Building brought to mind the old Calumet Building, which had burned for fourteen hours. That recalled the Southern Hotel and the Business Club, where a six-inch gas main had blazed for half an hour in the very heart of the wooden partitions and floorings of the upper stories. When Burr had lived through the morning with such recollections — walking at top speed all the while—perspiration stood on his forehead, and his heart was beating as heavily as if he had just finished one of those mad old-time battles with flame.

He found himself standing at a downtown crossing, looking along a wide street that ended miles away in a little group of spires and roof peaks. A curious, throbbing beat was in his ears, tormenting him, driving him into a fever—the clang of an engine gong.

He saw the traffic clear, and heard the savage rumble of a straining gasoline motor. Then a ladder truck went by, lunging and crashing, as if it were a red fragment of the wild March wind. Martin O'Brien was set like a rock at the wheel—in his undershirt, as usual. Charley Downs clung on the footboard, struggling with one sleeve of his rubber coat. The chief screamed—screamed in sudden agony. Then he set off at full speed.

No. 5 was out of its district. That meant a general alarm. Burr ran four blocks, turned a corner, went on past scattered units of equipment, past a laboring steamer, into a gathering crowd, through it, up to the very limits of the fire lines. A red-faced, grinning sergeant of police snatched him from the mob.

" Come on in, old-timer," he chuckled.

Burr took place beside the sergeant, fists doubled, lungs pumping, and watched Lansdow out in the open, prominent in his white rubber coat, directing a fire fight.

" It's a proud day for him," he told the sergeant. " His first big one! But, my God, what's the matter?"

The old chief fidgeted restlessly. He had no particular envy of Lansdow—no more enmity for him than for any other man. He had only one emotion, the passion that had ruled his life for many years —love for the department, love for watching it do things right; and now he saw that something was wrong.

To tell all the old chief saw is to risk confusion; to tell it as he saw it, wholly and instantaneously, is impossible. One must have been twenty-five years on the job to do that.

The fire was in a six-story hotel building. It had started in the basement, and had gained such headway that the first companies had sent in a second alarm upon arrival. The hook and ladder companies had been set to removing the guests by way of the fire escapes, since the main staircase and the corridors were charged with smoke. A hose line had been sent to the basement by way of the main entrance and the central staircase.

Another engine company had attempted to work in through a side entrance. A third had been sent to a stair hallway at the right rear corner of the building.

Now fire is an enemy. When the term " fire fighter " was evolved, it meant something. Fire is tenacious; it strikes, destroys, leaps, and runs for life.

In this case, when the first stream opened its attack, the fire literally ran from it, back toward the rear of the building, back toward a vital point—the rear stair shaft on the right. A bellying volume of flame burst through a basement window and threatened a fire escape platform overhead—a platform loaded with people.

Lansdow, having taken command, had called back the second hose line to play upon this window and protect the people. He had countermanded his original order to the third company, and had directed it to take the place of the second, at the side entrance. Countermanded orders mean confusion and delay. The fire made good its hold on the rear stairway, and leaped upward with a shouting noise, seizing on balustrades and steps, gripping wooden platforms, and flaring through doors into the main corridors of the building.

This rear staircase had been principally used by servants, who were careless, and it was draped with articles of clothing, dust rags, and drying mops. With such fuel, the temperature in the ancient shaft rose at an explosive rate. The windows, from top to bottom, burst out.

The third line was driven back by heat before its work became effective. Lansdow had sent fourth and fifth lines to the fire escapes, to get on the rear stair hall from the floors. A sixth had been sent to the roof of a five-story building which adjoined the hotel.

All this Burr perceived in the twinkling of an eye, partly from his knowledge of the old Amazon Hotel building, and partly from what he saw. He also saw that Lansdow was apparently confused by the rapidity with which the fire was gaining. He saw the fourth and fifth lines prevented from entering fire escape windows by smoke and gases, which now charged the building solidly. He saw the sixth company get a futile stream in operation from the adjoining roof. He saw a newly arrived hook and ladder company sent to aid the guests.

Then came something worse. The men operating the first line began to withdraw from the basement, driven out by heat and smoke.

Lansdow, acutely conscious that another five minutes would see the blaze over the whole building, acutely conscious that the wind would take such a fire right down the street, lost his head completely. He rushed at the retreating crew, shouting a useless command.

"Get back there!" he roared. "Get back in there!"

The helpless crew hesitated. Burr saw Lansdow double his fist and strike at one of the men.

Then Burr stopped thinking. Out he ran, leaping over the tangled hose lines, flinging away his overcoat to the tugging wind. In less than a second, it seemed—it was like magic transportation—his hand was on Lansdow's shoulder, gripping until he felt the flesh writhe beneath it.

"Ventilate, you damned fool!" he commanded. "Get a ladder crew up on the roof!"

Ten years of command rang in that voice, and it blared as fire trumpets used to blare in the forties. Lansdow stiffened, blinked, calmed, turned into a fireman again.

"All right, chief," he said meekly.

Burr turned to the officer of a newly arrived ladder company.

"Get your men and come with me!" he directed. "Bring a twelve-foot section!"

The officer, one Luke Flanagan, set off at a run, grinning delightedly. Burr, taking up a sort of dog trot, went directly to the building adjoining the hotel, and, with Flanagan's platoon at his heels, mounted to the roof.

Nothing was said. The twelve-foot ladder section was set across a gap between the buildings and up to the hotel roof. The moment it was in place, Burr ran up it and led the way to a spot near the center of the area.

"Here!" he called. "The hallway's here. Open her up! I'll give you just two minutes!"

There was a tearing sound as strong men hacked through the metal roofing and stripped it back with the hooks. Then a steady, furious crunching as axes bit through the sheathing. Planking was cut, ripped up, tossed away. The I-beams of the roof came into view, and below them the sheathing of the ceiling.

Burr patted a stalwart axman on the back with a grunt of praise, and hurled a burning epithet at a youngster who stopped to look at the right rear corner, where there was a smoking rectangle of paint bubbles. Twelve feet of ceiling went down with a crash, and a great puff of black gases burst upward.

Burr raced to the forward parapet.

"Now take that line in!" he bellowed.

In the street below, the waiting crew lunged forward. They would go anywhere for Chief Burr.

"Lansdow!" howled Burr. "She's open!"

With a grunt, he strolled back across the roof.

"Come down," he said to Flanagan.

He went on dreamily. The fire was over, as far as he was concerned. The delirium which had gripped him from the time he heard No. 5 on the run, passed away. It was like waking suddenly from a soothing sleep. He trotted down the stairs, shivering a little.

When he arrived at the street level, a marked change in the situation had become evident.

The third line of hose was in the basement, the second at the very entrance to the rear stair shaft. Two more lines were working from the third and fourth floors. The chief's ventilator had so cleared the building of smoke that chemical men from the salvage corps were blocking the progress of the fire along the corridors of the building. There was no flame in sight, only a great cloud of steam flaunting out from the shaft windows.

Burr nodded approval, and took a hesitant step toward the front of the hotel. Flanagan passed him. Burr caught at the lieutenant's heavy shoulder.

"Tell Lansdow I said, 'Excuse me for butting in,'" he directed.

As Flanagan mumbled in a surprised way, Burr set off in an opposite direction, seeking the fire lines, anxious to take himself out of sight—a trotting, bunchy, smoke-blackened figure.

VI

An hour later, perhaps, grimy and breathing heavily, he burst into the press room at the City Hall, galvanizing half a dozen lounging newspaper men into activity. His eyes were alight with resolution, his countenance was twisted.

"Come with me!" he barked. "Come with me! I'm going to do something, and I want you boys to back me up; but understand one thing—no matter what I do, I'm not going to beg off anybody, and I'm not asking for favors or charity!"

"Yes, sir," said one of the reporters.

The others grinned in delight. They went around to the elevators—an odd, trailing group—and up to the mayor's office on the second floor.

Burr's demand for an interview with that official was honored immediately, and he led the newspaper men inside. The mayor confronted him, smiling in a good-humored way upon his sooted countenance and flashing eyes.

"What is it, chief?" he asked.

"I want to say something," stumbled Burr, never fluent, except at fires. "I want to ask something, in front of these boys here—"

"Just a minute!" interrupted the mayor, frowning in a calculating way—the way of a politician who balances men and forces one against the other. "Just a minute! Is it something about the department?"

"Of course!" grumbled the chief impatiently. "I'm a fireman, ain't I?"

The mayor nodded, and moved thoughtfully toward the door of his conference room.

"Just a minute!" he repeated. "Just a minute!"

Then he seemed to make up his mind about something. He caught at the knob that opened the door of the room where he received committees, and where official hearings were held.

"Come in, gentlemen!" he called. "Come in here for a minute, please!"

There was a surprised exclamation from beyond the door, and four men came into the mayor's office. One was Commissioner Donald, who looked flushed and angry. One was the freckle-faced reporter, and his eyes gleamed with the light of battle. The third was Lansdow, who seemed a trifle confused and wooden, like all men who have been taught to talk little and act quickly. Last of all came Brookins, the millionaire who made bosses, and who would put forty thousand into the campaign fund. His face was like a thundercloud.

All four started in surprise on seeing Burr.

"Now, chief!" smiled the mayor. "Say what you've come to say."

Burr cast a haggard glance at the newcomers, then burst into words.

"Mr. Mayor," he began, "I made a fool of myself this morning. I answered an alarm, and butted in on Lansdow's work. All I can say is, I couldn't help it. No. 5 was out of her district, d'ye see? I want the department to forget that, and I want Lansdow to forget it. I want to ask you for something."

He choked. They could see that he was fighting with his deep-rooted, fiery pride.

"Men, I'm nobody as a politician, and I don't get anybody any votes, but all the same you can't throw away city money. You can't throw away the training this city has given me; so I'm here asking for a job in the fire department. I'm a fireman, ain't I? Well, then, all I ask is a job—anything from private to district chief. That will show I'm fair, I guess, and that I'm no sorehead in love with brass buttons." His voice lost its harsh note. He became diffident. "All I say is, the department trained me, and the department made me, and it don't matter who is chief. Now, what do you say?"

The mayor turned away with a queer, strained expression. The reporters fell back into an embarrassed group in a corner of the office. The room became very quiet.

"My God!" some one exclaimed, in a voice that trembled.

Brookins was first to reply.

"That's what I'm here for," he announced belligerently. "I came to see about getting you a job. This young reporter seems to like you because you hit him once. He saw you in action this morning, and he called on me about it."

Donald, with an anxious movement, lost no time in speaking up.

"Why, there's no question about his having a job," he conciliated. "I never intended that he should leave the department. I wanted him to take the first district. That's the most important one in town, and he can have it any time he—"

There was a sudden movement. Lansdow, dapper and self-confident as ever, moved forward and caught at the commissioner's arm. His lips had gone tight over his teeth, and his eyes—blue, clear-seeing outdoor eyes—had a light in them.

"No!" he interrupted sharply. "No—he can't take the first district." He looked toward the old chief, his lips trying to smile. "I won't have him under me," he declared. "I won't have any man under me who can give me lessons in handling a fire. There's another story to tell here. The department trained him and made him, and since then he's been training the department." Lansdow stiffened proudly, sneering at the silent civilians before him. "Our department," he boasted, "doesn't only show you how to tighten a coupling. It shows you how to be a man; and where is there a man who will take something that belongs to somebody else?"

He caught his breath.

"I resign," he announced, gasping. "I resign in favor of the chief. The first district is mine, anyhow."

Burr's eyes went dim. Faces blurred before them, and began to swim around his head. He heard an uproar of exclamation—something like a cheer.

Brookins's voice arose again, friendly and satisfied.

"There!" approved the millionaire. "That's what I wanted—the best possible thing all around!"

Hands began to clutch at the chief, voices to utter congratulations. Of a sudden, he pushed the hands aside and impulsively stepped forward to Lansdow.

"You're a fool!" he rasped. "You crazy kid, you're a fool! I won't take it!"

"You've got to," snapped Lansdow. "It's open, and it's yours."

"I won't—" began the chief again. He stopped, listening. "I won't," he repeated mechanically.

From far away on the first floor came a faint clanging—the telegraph gong. Every one heard it and strained to catch its distant vibrations.

"Four-four-two," muttered Burr raptly. "Four-four-two! Good God!"

Forgetting the others, not seeing them, he spun on his heel and dashed out of the room. A great chorus of hysterical laughter arose.

THE LAST SONG

Time runs apace,
I have few hours to spare;
Therefore I sing up yonder to her face
Throned in the air—
My last song to my star,
Dreaming my words may reach her at the last,
In her bright place.

Alas, I fear that all my longing vast
Will not avail to bridge yon gleaming space
Where she in glory hides,
And so securely bides!
Lost in the roar of planets, my poor song
All, all in vain my earthly prayers prolong.

And yet who knows
But she may one day hear,
And from her bosom cast a rose,
Falling from sphere to sphere,
Making of her the heavenly pathway sweet,
To fall in consolation here—
Here at my feet?

Richard Le Gallienne

Boiled Coffee

THE MAIDEN AUNT PLAYS AN UNEXPECTED PART IN A FAMILY DISCUSSION ON THE SUBJECT OF MARRIAGE

By Mella Russell McCallum

THE Brotherton family were assembled in the yellow and white breakfast room—Marta, the professor, their son James, and Miss Willie Mayhew from South Carolina.

Aunt Ann's place was vacant, but she was expected. She had wired that she would be at home this morning in time for breakfast. She had been away for a fortnight, starting a coöperative laundry in a mill town somewhere. Aunt Ann was always going around starting things — and finishing them, too. This time she had been gone rather longer than usual.

Marta poured coffee from a copper urn for Willie Mayhew, James, and herself. The professor had his coffee prepared specially in the kitchen—boiled in the good old-fashioned way, as he termed it.

Marta was pleasantly vivid. She combed her dark hair so that the gray scarcely showed. Her morning gown was just the right shade of blue to go with her eyes. Marta's eyes were lovely. They would have been even lovelier if she had been happier.

The professor was personable, also. He was gray and crisp. He wore a Vandyke beard. His eyes were as clear as northern lakes—and as cold, Marta thought. The professor's eyes never kindled except over some research problem, or over James, or when the coffee was not boiled to suit him.

As for James, he was just a college boy, blond, athletic, bright enough, but not studious. His parents adored him. They adored him so much that they had vowed long ago to save him from their mistake—marriage.

Aunt Ann had always upheld them in the vow. A spinster of fifty, she was the happiest person they knew. She never had spells of depression. She never went off her head. She was cheerful and vigorous and dependable. She was a convincing argument for celibacy.

It was something of a nuisance, having Willie Mayhew up for this visit; but Willie's mother had been a college chum of Marta's, and there had been an obligation socially. Willie *was* a dear child, of course—a little brown wren, and no trouble, as guests go.

James had stepped forward nobly about entertaining her, too. Marta wasn't sure that he hadn't been too noble. He had motored with Willie Mayhew when he should have been studying to lift his "con" in trigonometry; but in a few days Willie's visit would be over, and she would go back to South Carolina.

In the meantime, why didn't Aunt Ann come? The wheels of the new laundry must be recalcitrant about cogging properly somewhere.

"What are your plans for the day?" inquired the professor generally.

"I was thinking that Willie and I would go to see Barrymore, and dine at Giolino's after the matinée. Will you join us there for dinner, Robert? This is Tilly's day out."

"Thank you, no. I have no taste for marrow bones and garlic. If Tilly were to cook such messes here as you insist on eating when you go out!" The professor snorted. "I shall dine at Browne's, where I can get a nourishing steak and—"

"And boiled coffee, of course," Marta put in, smiling brightly.

"But what about me?" spoke up James. "Aren't you a bit high-handed, mother?"

"You are to stay at home and study. I'll see that Tilly leaves something in the refrigerator for you."

"By all means," seconded the professor.

"The idea of a son of mine being conditioned in a simple academic subject!"

The young man shrugged his nice wide shoulders.

"But — Willie and I were going down town this morning."

Marta glanced at her guest. Willie's cream-colored skin was unusually flushed. Marta thought the girl seemed nervous. The way she crumbled her toast showed it. Yes, it was a good idea to leave James off the entertainment committee to-day.

"Miss Willie," demanded the professor, "has James confided to you the fact that he is conditioned in trigonometry?"

"No, Professor Brotherton."

"I should think he *would* be ashamed to admit it! The idea of a son of mine!"

"Then our day is settled," Marta said calmly. "I wonder why Ann doesn't come! Did the telegram say she would arrive alone, Robert, or is she bringing a committee with her?"

Aunt Ann was apt to call committee meetings at breakfast time. She was different from most people. They kept a little room off the library always in readiness for her friends.

"Unfortunately, mother, I must interrupt. Willie and I *are* going down town this morning. The 'were' was an error."

"I'm sure Willie will let you off, in view of circumstances," insisted Marta, inclining her head lightly and graciously.

"No, Willie won't let me off—that is, I hope she won't. You see—I might as well take a high dive—we're getting married this morning."

Marta held her body rigid. She saw her husband's face darken slightly.

"Is this a joke, son?" she asked.

James leaned forward toward the girl.

"Oh, he *is* good-looking!" Marta told herself.

"Willie, is it a joke?" the boy repeated.

"No, Mrs. Brotherton, I'm afraid—it isn't."

The wren lifted her chin to an arrogant angle. Marta was amazed—and sick.

The professor girded his loins. He always entered battle suavely.

"There must be some mistake about this," he began.

"No, sir, there's no mistake about it. I'm twenty-two. Willie is twenty-one. With what grandmother left me, and what I shall earn, we shan't be a drag on you, sir."

Impossible! Impossible that it could be their son speaking! James, who had been taught from childhood to avoid marriage as a plague! Of course, Willie Mayhew couldn't know that. They had never displayed their hand before guests. Traditional good taste had bound them to face the world like any serenely mated couple; but James had lived behind the scenes. James knew!

Marta's love of propriety struggled with her conviction. This was serious! She should never have let the boy run around with the little Southerner; but Willie was such a wren that Marta hadn't dreamed of danger.

She drew a sharp, sucking breath. Good taste! What did it matter now, with her boy's happiness at stake? The next instant she had discarded tradition, and was speaking passionately.

"You don't know what you're talking about, James! Marriage! Oh, you must not! You know you must not! It is the death of congeniality — of romance — of happiness, in fact!"

"How many happily married people do you know, James?" cut in the professor.

"Not so frightfully many, I'll admit. You and mother have always opened my eyes to the disillusioning side of it; but I'm willing to take my chance."

"Your chance!" the professor snapped. "That's what we all did—all except your Aunt Ann. She was wise. Tell me this, James—isn't your Aunt Ann happy?"

"Yes," the boy muttered.

"Your father is right. Oh, James, be wise, too! Better a sharp heartache now than a whole lifetime of flatness," implored Marta.

Willie Mayhew's eyes had grown wide, at first with amazement, now with unrestrained indignation.

"Don't you want Jimmy to marry—ever? Or is it—me?"

"Oh, child, it isn't you! Please don't think that!" Marta was contrite. "We don't want James to marry any one. We want him to be happy."

"Don't be shocked at mother and dad, Willie." James laughed jerkily. "They're horribly unethical. If every one agreed with them, old Mrs. Nature would be in a fine pickle, wouldn't she?"

"As far as ethics are concerned, there are enough people who disagree with us to keep the world running for some time," said Marta. "Now Aunt Ann is a person of mature judgment, and she is perfectly happy in her chosen state. James knows what conclusions he should draw."

"Oh, it—it sounds dreadful for you to speak so, Mrs. Brotherton—and before Professor Brotherton, too!" faltered Willie.

"Mrs. Brotherton isn't wounding me," the professor assured Willie. "We are both aware that we are overstepping the bounds of taste, but this is a subject very near our hearts. It is, in fact, the subject nearest our hearts. We do not wish James to marry."

"Oh, I do wish Ann would come! I can't think what keeps her," wailed Marta.

"I'm glad she's late," said James, "for she'll be against us, too, Willie."

"Oh, she'll be broken-hearted, if you take this step! Wait for her, James," Marta pleaded. "Let her advise you. She is so sane—so wise—so good!"

"Has your aunt's advice ever failed you, son?" insisted the professor.

"No!" James Brotherton was white. "Damn it — that's why! I'm afraid to wait. Aunt Ann has decided things for me all my life." He spoke in a small-boy, rebellious, helpless tone. "She's the most damnably convincing person—"

He broke off chokingly.

"I think we'd better wait, Jimmy," suggested the wren.

Professor Brotherton drew a triumphant hand down his beard. Marta relaxed. Thank Heaven, it would soon be all right! Ann would iron out the children's troubles. Ann would even manage to send them on their separate ways smiling.

James shoved back his chair and stalked into the living room, without asking permission to leave the table.

"There's a taxi stopping now," he called back moodily. "Several people getting out."

"Then she did bring a committee," smiled Marta. She summoned the maid. "Tilly, when Miss Ann comes in, show her friends into the little room, you know. She'll want her breakfast first." Marta went on to explain to Willie. "Mr. Brotherton's sister is so delightfully different from the rest of the world! She puts her soul into her projects. Just now it's cooperative laundries."

Tilly bustled about, straightening the silver at the vacant place, a pleased, anticipatory expression on her face.

"Bring some of those muffins Miss Ann likes, Tilly; and remember how she prefers her egg."

"I shan't forget—not Miss Ann's egg," said the servant.

There was a hard, long ring. Tilly disappeared, and James returned to his place. They waited.

Voices—and the next moment Ann Brotherton entered the scene like a prairie breeze. She was widely built, with pleasantly straying gray hair under a severe gray felt hat. Her suit was gray, well but loosely cut. Her face was rosy and unlined. Her eyes were blue and childlike. She beamed.

"Well, Marta—Bob—Jimmy! And this is the young lady from the South. I'm glad to know you, my dear!"

"We thought you'd never get here," began Marta. "Didn't the laundry—"

But Ann had turned her broad back upon them and returned to the hall.

"No, Tilly," they heard her call. "Not in there—I want them to meet my family right away."

The professor and Marta exchanged glances of mock dismay. Ann was certainly different from other people!

Miss Brotherton appeared again, beaming even more broadly. Her manner resembled that of some nice old mother hen. At one side, and slightly behind, came two chicks—a small, scholarly-looking elderly man, who smiled in a gray, absent-minded fashion, and a severe woman of sixty.

"This is my husband, Dr. Abernathy," announced Aunt Ann; "and his sister, Miss Abernathy." She paused, the better to beam. "We're frightfully hungry, Marta! Do you think, while we remove some of the dust of travel, that Tilly could boil another pot of coffee? The doctor prefers his boiled, like Bob. I'm sure there's enough left in the urn for Serena and me. Will the table be too crowded, if we squeeze in a couple of extra chairs?"

It was James who bridged the sharp, inhospitable gap before Marta could reply—James, with a chuckle underneath his words.

"You can have our places, Aunt Ann," he said, speaking for the wren as well. "We have to hurry away to an engagement; but first—"

He planted an affectionate kiss on his aunt's healthy cheek, and thrust out a brotherly hand to Dr. Abernathy.

The Bullfighter

A ROMANCE OF THE THRILLING SPORT OF THE ARENA

By T. S. Stribling

Author of "Birthright," "East Is East," etc.

PANCHO PACHECHO, a young Venezuelan of humble birth, has won fame and money as a favorite *torero* of the bull ring in Caracas, under the name of Angelito. He has built himself a showy house, in which he lives with his mother; but the old peasant woman poses as his servant, lest she should disgrace her son before his fine new friends.

One of these friends is Rafael Jiminez, a young aristocrat of Paraiso, the fashionable quarter of Caracas. Young Jiminez, who is full of romantic ideas, is a poet and an amateur *torero*. When Angelito goes to the provincial city of Valencia for a *corrida*, he insists on accompanying his friend as second swordsman. As he has promised his mother, his sister, and his fiancée, Margarita Miraflores, that he will not enter the ring, he sends the young professional to the Jiminez villa to get his fighting clothes, on the pretext that Angelito is going to use them himself.

The two young men go to Valencia, and in the *circo* there Rafael is badly wounded. Angelito sorrowfully takes his friend back to Caracas, and installs him in his own house. Then he goes to the Jiminez mansion to return the clothes, intending to say that they have been accidentally torn when a young bull tossed him against a fence.

VII

ANGELITO ascended the steps of the Jiminez villa and rang the bell. Once more he nervously assembled his intended speech:

"I am sorry, *señorita,* that I tore Rafael's clothes, but a *novillo* tossed me—"

In the midst of this rehearsal came a sound of quick footsteps in the hallway. A moment later the inner door opened, and not the maid but the Señora and the Señorita Jiminez appeared. Both women were greatly excited.

"Where's Rafael?" cried the *señora,* and began undoing the bronze shutter.

"What has happened to him?" the *señorita* immediately added. "He has been gone from home two nights! Do you know anything about this?" she cried, rattling a newspaper at Angelito.

By this time the *señora* had unfastened the grille, and she and the *señorita* rushed out on the bullfighter, surrounding him with a faint, cool fragrance.

The *torero's* rehearsed phrases long since had flown.

"About what, *señorita?*" he inquired vacantly.

"This!" The *señorita* shook the newspaper at him, unfolded it and pointed to the first page. She began reading the headlines in a shaken voice: "'Son of illustrious Caraqueno family desperately wounded in *corrida* at Valencia—nameless *torero* tossed by bull after series of daring passes—barbarous custom of using flambeaux on bull causes disaster.'"

The girl suddenly seized Angelito's arm and shook it. There were tears in her eyes.

"That's Rafael! There is not another *joven* in all Caracas so mad as to do such a thing!" She shook Angelito's arm again. "Where is he? What have you done with him?"

"God's mercy!" cried Angelito, entirely nonplused by this attack. "I know nothing about him!"

"Weren't you in Valencia with him?"

"*Caramba,* no, *señorita!*"

"You are the man who carried him his clothes and rapier!"

"No, no—I borrowed them for myself!"

"Oh, Holy Virgin!" cried the *señora* despairingly. "Is there no way to get the truth out of a peon?"

"But, *señora,* I tell you that I fought a *novillada*—"

"You carried those clothes straight to Rafael!" sobbed the *señora.* "My poor

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boy is dead! I know he's dead! He's dead!"

The handsome woman fell to weeping miserably.

"No, *madre!*" cried the girl. "No—Rafael is wounded, and he sent this *bribón* up here to say that he is all right. I know that's what he has done. It's exactly what he would do!" Socorro's black eyes glistened with tears. She turned on Angelito and took his breath with a sudden question: "Now where is he?"

"*Señorita!*" cried Angelito, entirely unable to shift his plans so suddenly. "Rafael has simply gone down to the Jiminez estate on the Tuy for a few days. He—"

Socorro gave a little cry.

"Oh! Oh! That proves that what I said is true!"

"*Caramba,* how?" cried the *torero.*

"You would never have known we had an estate on the Tuy if Rafael hadn't told you!"

"*Ciertamente* he told me!" cried Angelito excitedly. "He told me to tell you that when I returned his clothes."

"Did you go with him to the Tuy?"

"*Seguramente,* no, *señorita!* I fought a *novillada.*"

"At Valencia?"

"No—near the Matadero. We hired a young bull."

"On the *fiesta?*"

"*Seguramente, señorita.*"

"Then, if Rafael was in Caracas on the *fiesta,* why didn't he come home that night? There is only one train a day to the Tuy."

The *señora* controlled her sobs long enough to plead in her deep tones:

"Please, please, *señor,* don't tell us any more lies! Where is Rafael? Is he dead?"

"No!" cried Angelito distractedly. "He is not dead. He is in the blue *casa* at the corner of Miercoles and Traposo."

At this the two women started impetuously for the cab at the gate.

"*Por l'amor de Dios!*" cried the bullfighter, hurrying after them. "Don't go rushing in like that! You'll upset him. He's asleep!"

But the women went on flying down the path, sobbing and praying under their breath. Angelito followed, and a moment later he saw them get into his cab and drive away through the sunshine.

He tramped back to the Jiminez gate, astonished and chagrined at the outcome of his performance. After the cab and the ladies were quite out of sight, he could still distinctly feel the place on his arm where the Señorita Jiminez had caught him and urged him to tell the truth. *Diantre,* she did not know, she could not see, that he was trying to protect her and her mother! He made violent gestures to a series of mental exclamations about the stupidity of women.

He let himself out of the gate, and moved along the handsome boulevard, thinking over an imaginary conversation with Socorro Jiminez. At first he railed at her, showed her her injustice, her ingratitude. It was a white lie he was telling her—one meant to bring her peace of mind. She had called him a liar when the holy saints knew that she was addressing a man whose whole heart was for her a well of truth.

"My feeling for you, *señorita,*" soliloquized Angelito, murmuring the words in the most appealing tones, "is as the hermit for the saint he adores. I have often thought of you as a kind of handmaid of Heaven, who is lowered in a glory to see me risk my life in the *circo.* Then you vanish away, your grace, your sweetness, your beauty, and I can bring you back only by risking my life again and again. He who reads men's hearts knows that I would court danger and even death itself rather than never see you again!"

Angelito's inner voice was trembling with tears. He was moved by his fancy to say farewell to Socorro, although there was no reason why he should not have pursued his meditation for the rest of the day, had he so desired. Perhaps he was growing a little weary of her image, though he did not realize it.

"*Adios, señorita!*" he murmured. "You call me false. It is the falseness of a yearning heart that would give its hope of heaven to remove one shadow from your joy, one single thorn from—"

His reverie did not stop, as a conversation might stop. It simply grew thinner and more tenuous. The trembling voice seemed to sink into some mental distance, still protesting, still worshiping, and was gone.

Somebody called Angelito's name. The bullfighter looked up and saw a small, very trig gentleman in a formal black coat and pearl gray trousers, whisking a cane. It was Narciso Montauban, and this was rather surprising. The surprise was not that Señor Montauban should have been strolling on Paraiso, for his home was along here somewhere, but that in such a place he should have called Angelito's name.

"Out promenading, I see," remarked the editor, looking with a certain curiosity at the *torero*.

Angelito decided not to admit promenading too far.

"I thought I would stretch my legs as far as the Puente de Hierro. I'll catch a tram there."

The other man waited for Angelito to come up, and then actually turned and fell in at his side.

"I hope," said Señor Montauban earnestly, "that you called by the Jiminez villa, and told the ladies what you know about Rafael. They are quite disturbed over the poor boy."

"Yes, I did," nodded the *torero*, more and more amazed at his growing inclusion in Paraiso life.

"Did you really?" Montauban glanced up at the big fellow, then added: "That was very thoughtful."

"*Sí*," assured Angelito, expanding. "I let them know that Rafael was at my *casa*. Immediately they rushed out, took my cab, and drove up there. You should have met them."

While these words told a verbal truth, the manner in which Angelito said it conveyed an impression that the Jiminez family had received him in the most intimate way, and had borrowed the cab of an old friend.

"*Caramba!*" ejaculated the editor, looking at him quite frankly now. "I knew you and Rafael knew each other, but—*cà*, Paraiso is the boulevard where one must be acquainted, if one expects to know any one at all! Now you, *señor*—" Narciso broke off. "Pardon me, *señor*, but may I ask what is your real name? One can hardly address a friend of the Jiminez family by the name he uses in the *circo*."

The question caught Angelito unprepared. He was even uncertain whether or not it was asked in good faith. He tried to decide this point while he formed an answer, and the dual operation confused him.

It would never do to say that his name was Pancho Pachecho. *Madre in cielo*, a peon named Pancho Pachecho promenading Paraiso with Señor Narciso Montauban! Impossible!

He moistened his lips.

"My name really is Angel — Gabrielo Angel," said the fighter. "I made it Angelito to be like the rest of the *toreros*."

"Juan Leon uses his own name," observed Montauban.

"Yes—I had thought about using mine. I don't like my placards somehow, Señor Montauban. The other day, in Malestar's wine shop, I was looking at my placards. I don't know, but somehow I don't like them."

Señor Montauban had a dried-looking skin, and now his smile made it look a trifle drier and crinklier.

"I have never noticed. Do you know, there is one thing I cannot understand about men like you and Juan Leon—how you can fight bulls for money. Certainly I know the charm of a bullfight—the color, the light, the high zest of soul; but how any one can do it for money—so much zest for so much money!" The editor spread his hands. "It's rather grotesque."

Angelito had never faced such an attack as this in all his life. It was a most extraordinary viewpoint.

"*Pues*," he said thoughtfully, "you print articles in *Sol y Sombra* for money. Tito Monnico paints pictures for money."

"*Sol y Sombra, sí.* We old families must recoup our fortunes. If we do not" —Narciso made an expressive gesture— "we drown. We are lost in the tide of half-breed blood that is sweeping over Venezuela. You, who are trying to hold your head above water here in Paraiso, know that as well as the rest of us."

Angelito nodded, not very clear on just which side of the fence the editor was placing him.

"*Sí*," continued Señor Montauban, "the old *conquistador* blood of Venezuela is being diluted, thinned, lost. Mestizo upstarts, griffes, zambos, part negro, part Carib, part Spanish—*diablo* knows what goes into them! What vessels to preserve the ancient Spanish ideals, the old Spanish manners, courtesy, art, magnificence, and power! Do you imagine such half-breeds can reproduce the Spanish soul? Look at Caracas. Possibly there are ten pure-blooded Spanish families in the city—ten left, out of the hundreds of thousands of Spanish cavaliers who conquered this rich country! Read the roll of *caballeros* who set this country free—once an honorable roll, Señor Angel, but boiled down to mongrels now!"

The editor shook his head.

"What is left of us is vanishing," he went on. "Any mestizo with a little money immediately reaches out for a *señorita.* She is lost, her children are lost, the race is lost—for a race stands or falls through its women, Señor Angel."

A queer internal trembling set up in Angelito. The editor was a most surprising little man, and had the strangest ideas. Throughout his monologue the bullfighter scented an attack on himself.

Angelito knew that his father had merely a strain of Spanish blood, and his mother none at all; but that was no reason why he, Angelito, should not be as good as anybody. If that was what Señor Montauban meant—

Still, the editor seemed to be talking of other people—the mestizos, the griffes, the zambos. All Angelito could do was to move along by Señor Montauban's side and nod occasionally.

Presently they came to the Puente de Hierro, or Bridge of Iron—a long viaduct that spans the Guayra River to the south of Caracas. The viaduct crosses the wide, fertile valley of the river, and spread below it are great truck farms and banana groves. At regular intervals along the sides of the viaduct rise royal palms, with their crests glittering high in the sunshine.

At the Puente de Hierro the two men separated, Angelito crossing it into the heart of the city. As the bullfighter moved across the bridge, he looked down and saw some half dozen peons at work in a grove below. They moved in and out under the great leaves of the banana plants, digging about the roots, hacking off a dead stem, and dragging it out of the way. Angelito knew they were toiling for a certain Señor Boncillo, who owned the field and had a box at the *circo.*

A disturbing emotion arose in Angelito, vague and formless. He moved on again. Toward the north he saw a thin yellow trail zigzagging up the enormous massif of the mountains. The peons made that, too.

VIII

Among the bullfighters, *banderilleros,* and *aficionados* who foregathered in Pamba Malestar's wine shop in Candelaria Plaza, there circulated a daily grist of gossip as to what was happening at the blue *casa* on Traposo Calle.

The bullfighters could not decide whether a desirable thing, or an undesirable one, had happened to Angelito. A lean-faced mulatto, whose greasy, crinkly hair was drawn tightly back in a bullfighter's cue, leaned over the blackened table, pushed forward a double-six domino, and vented this philosophy:

"At any rate, both the Señora and the Señorita Jiminez are all but living in the blue *casa* now, nursing Rafael. Every hour some great carriage stops in front of his house, and *tr-r-ring* goes his doorbell. In steps a banker, maybe, to inquire about Rafael. *Tr-r-ring*—now it's an editor. *Tr-r-ring*—next a *señorita.* All of them walk just so."

The mulatto straightened himself in his chair, composed his face to a preternatural gravity, and imitated the callers entering the blue *casa.* The *aficionados* burst out laughing.

"*Cà!*" ejaculated an old man. "I don't know whether the aristocrats find any pleasure in life or not, always wearing clean clothes and collars and shoes, and talking on dull subjects; but it isn't reasonable that they would do these unpleasant things day after day unless there was some good point to it. If Angelito really has become an aristocrat, maybe his taste has changed. *Cà,* you can never tell about a man!"

A *banderillero* with his eyes in pouches from dissipation winked and observed that any man was likely to wear collars when a *señorita* was in his *casa,* for conversation with such a *bicho* was never dull.

"*Caramba,* yes," put in the mulatto with tight hair; "but she stays constantly at her brother's bedside. Yet the money Angelito throws away on that *chica!* Why, only the other day a peon drove his donkey loaded with flowers down from the mountain past the blue *casa.* When this *señorita* saw the donkey through the window, she cried out, 'How beautiful!' And this madman, Angelito, who was at the door to ask about his friend, immediately exclaimed, 'It is yours, *señorita!*' Both the *señorita* and her mother tried to stop him; but no, he ran out into the *calle,* bought all the flowers, and hired the donkey to stand all day in his *patio,* loaded just as it was, where the *señorita* could look out and see it. Just fancy a flower donkey standing among the pink columns of Angelito's *patio* for an ornament! *Caramba!*"

The circle broke out laughing again.

"Do they eat at his *casa?*" inquired some one.

"*Olà*, there's a point!" proceeded the humorous mulatto. "I met Doña Ana at the *mercado* the other morning. She had her board of lottery tickets, for she never goes to market without taking her tickets and trying to sell enough to pay for her purchases.

"'Conchito! Come here quickly!' she cried, when she saw me.

"'What do you mean?' I asked.

"'Conchito, the Jiminezes have settled on us like locusts. You will have to buy two tickets from me to-day. I must have this basket full!'

"*Naturalmente* I bought two tickets, for when Doña Ana starts to sell you anything you have bought it already. She went on talking as I chose my numbers.

"'That little baggage called Margarita Miraflores will eat with us,' she said. 'My poor demented son insisted and insisted. God's blood, all they want out of my poor Pancho is something to eat, and flowers! It's a great pity there are any aristocrats in the whole world, Conchito!'

"'That may be true, Doña Ana,' I said; 'but aristocrats threw to Angelito the pearl bangles in your ears.'

"'*Cà!*' she said, and hunched up her shoulders. 'Perhaps they are that much service, but let them keep their distance. Aristocrats should know their places, Conchito, and not come forcing themselves where they are not wanted!'

"She was very angry, and elbowed her way around among the stalls. I watched what she bought—cassava bread, yammi, plantains, rice, and chicken—a regular peon's mess to serve to her guests; and she bought loads of everything, as the peons do when they make a feast."

Some of the gossips laughed at this, some sat silent. After a while a *banderillero* in a cheap coat asked:

"Conchito, how is it possible to make a feast in any other way than to buy a great deal of everything?"

"*Caramba!* You can buy fine things, unusual things, something to astonish your guests."

"*Pues*, what unusual things?"

"*Cà!* Ercolito, I can think of nothing unusual just at this moment. You are *loco* to expect it; but if a great army of aristocrats should march into my *casa*, I am sure they would have a fine tale to tell of Conchito's table. For instance, I would give them tea instead of coffee. Tea is a very rare, fine drink, Ercolito. It tastes something like dish water."

Old Malestar's wine shop might have been still more loquacious and humorous had it known the inner workings of Angelito's feast, and how remote the *torero* was from his guests—how he saw the Señorita Jiminez moving in and out of Rafael's sick room as inaccessible as a figure in a painting. All that she ever gave him was a "*Buenos dias, señor,*" of mornings and a word or two about Rafael's condition when Angelito came to inquire each forenoon and evening.

Once or twice, as he stood talking to Rafael, Angelito noticed the *señorita* looking intently at him. He wondered what she thought. He had not the remotest idea.

Such slight contacts, however, were sufficient to keep Socorro Jiminez perpetually in the bullfighter's mind. When he was away from her, he spent much of his time in fancying himself with her and talking to her. He conducted long monologues with her image—flattery in the hyperbolic strain of peons, outbursts of tenderness and passion.

The upshot of it all was a feverish feeling in his head, and the knowledge that presently Rafael would be taken back to Paraiso, and that this fair girl would go from his *casa*, to return no more. After that all that he would ever see of her would be glimpses caught from the *circo*, a distant figure in the sunshine, leaning over the balustrade and watching him graze death for her amusement.

For the first time in his life, Angelito felt the irony of amusing people by risking destruction. It was an amazing thing that he should bring a keen pleasure to Socorro Jiminez, and to ten thousand other *aficionados*, by taking dangerous chances or by getting killed. It was a disquieting riddle, one that Angelito lacked the subtlety to read.

One morning Angelito took this conundrum to the tiny garden at the back of his *casa*. This little space was only some forty feet square. It was surrounded by high brick walls, and was overgrown with wild guava bushes, with a spraddling tamarind tree in one corner. In the center was a small concrete basin of water.

The only inhabitant of the garden was a white heron with clipped wings. It was a morose bird. When a stranger came into the garden, it would elevate its delicate crest in anger, and would charge the intruder, threatening to stab with its long, lanciform beak. If the person attacked stood his ground, the heron's crest would fall, and it would hide away among the bushes. If he gave an inch, the bird would chase him out of the garden.

Angelito was fond of tossing live fish into the basin and watching the snow-white bird spear them. On this particular morning, as he went down into the garden with two small fishes in his hand, he met Señorita Miraflores coming out rather hastily, and behind her came the heron with crest erect.

Angelito laughed outright, and explained the bird's cowardice. The *señorita* turned on the slender-legged heron, and it darted away at once. Only by flinging a fish into the basin did Angelito persuade it to come out of the guavas.

Margarita became interested in the bird's expert fish spearing, and was amused at her own flight from such a blusterer.

"I think a great many formidable-looking birds, and persons, too, might be vanquished, Señor Angelito, by the display of a very little courage!"

The Señorita Miraflores was short and pretty, and always appeared gay and friendly. Her expression was so quizzical that the bullfighter looked at her quickly.

"For instance who, *señorita?*"

"*Caramba,* your heron, for one!" she said, and broke into soft laughter.

The extremely beguiling world which a well bred woman offers to a man opened on Angelito for the first time.

"I thought you meant some special person," said the bullfighter simply.

She lifted her brows.

"Oh, did you? Whom?"

The *torero* then saw that she had meant some special person, and also that this *señorita* was actually willing to be friendly with him and please him. He suddenly felt that he was lifted where he had always longed to be—on a comradely footing with the *señoritas* who came every Sunday to watch him fight. His heart began to beat.

Her implication, too, was heady. He knew very well whom she was talking about.

"The trouble is," explained Angelito earnestly, "that you may be brave at the wrong time, and may cause some one to be angry at you whom you would not have angered for your life!"

Señorita Miraflores flung up her hands.

"A *torero* say such a thing! *Caramba,* you've spoiled all my pleasure in bullfights! I shall always think, there stands a man who wouldn't dare face that bull if he thought there was the least chance of his getting hurt—not for his life!"

"But I am not talking about facing bulls!" cried Angelito. "I am talking about *señoritas!*"

"*Señoritas!* We were talking about herons!"

The bullfighter did not know quite what to say to the laughing girl, but she rescued him good-naturedly by asking him why he grew nothing but guavas and tamarinds in his garden.

In his relief he said unsuspectingly:

"My *madre* makes them into jellies and preserves, *señorita.*"

"Your *madre!*" The *señorita* glanced at him quickly. When she saw Angelito's increased embarrassment, she added casually: "I am sure she makes delightful jellies, Señor Angelito!"

"You must have some," said the *torero,* with the Spanish impulse to offer anything that his guest admires.

"Oh, I couldn't think of accepting such a gift!"

"Really," pursued Angelito, out of his natural generosity, "you should eat a dinner here in the *casa.*"

She smiled at him.

"Alone, Señor Angelito? I am afraid it is not proper for me to be talking with you alone here in the garden!"

The host saw what she meant, and paused at the audacity of the idea.

"I wonder if the Señora and the Señorita Jiminez—"

He broke off, questioning her mutely.

"Remember your heron!" she laughed.

"Do you really think so?" cried Angelito. "Why, the *señorita* almost never speaks to me."

Señorita Miraflores became grave enough.

"I am afraid she has a right to be angry, Señor Angelito. You carried him his rapier and clothes, and now—"

She nodded toward the *casa.*

"Is that it?" cried Angelito, with a sudden internal sinking. "*Ehue!* I am afraid I am to blame. I ought never to have allowed him to—" He broke off. "Still, Rafael asked me to get his things," he added, in extenuation.

"*Caramba!*" snapped Margarita, with a woman's instinct not to make the slightest allowance for any masculine conventions. "Don't speak of that! I did all I could to prevent him, and so should you have done; but let's not mention that. Why should you ruin our conversation by mentioning something that is irrevocable?"

"I'm such a blunderer," admitted the fighter.

Came a pause. Then Margarita said more evenly:

"She really did like your little donkey with the load of flowers. She said it made a picture."

"Did she like it?" cried Angelito, in great relief. "God's blood, but after I brought in that donkey how I suffered! 'Ah, Angelito!' I said to myself. 'Nobody but a donkey himself would think of bringing a donkey into his *casa!*'"

Margarita burst out laughing.

"*Cà!* You were wrong there. Your donkey was a great success, and I am very sure she would enjoy some of your *madre's* tamarinds. At any rate, she will have to eat them. She can't stay under your roof, *señor*, and refuse a meal. No matter what she thinks, she can't do that."

Angelito was tempted to protest his innocence in the wounding of Rafael once more, but he remembered that he must not introduce the topic. He said he would ask the Jiminezes to a dinner, although, if they disliked him, he would regret to force them to eat with him out of mere courtesy. Then, suddenly, he added this quotation from some of his endless musings about Socorro Jiminez:

"*Señorita,* to see Señorita Socorro at my table just once would light a candle in my heart which would still burn when I lie in my shroud!"

Señorita Margarita threw up her hands. "*Olà,* what a man!"

She turned and ran, laughing, out of the garden into the *casa.*

IX

THE little episode in the garden led to the dinner invitation some two days later. Once he had made up his mind to it, Angelito went about it with a strong attack. One day, after he had inquired about Rafael, he turned to the ladies in the room.

"*Caramba, señora, señoritas!*" he exclaimed, with the courage that comes with an ordeal. "This is impossible, for you to stay in my *casa* and never grace my poor table with your presence! If you will do me the honor of dining with me tomorrow evening—"

Margarita immediately accepted, for her part, and the other ladies had nothing else left.

After Angelito had gone, the three women sat a little blankly in the chamber with the frieze of rose vases, the crossed rapiers, and the religious chromos.

"Rafael," said the *señora,* "this is still another instance of the episodes your egregious bullfighting leads to!"

Rafael lay watching the little comedy with weak, amused eyes.

"*Cà! Madre,* now is the time for you to display your Christian fortitude."

"Fortitude?" repeated the dowager in her barytone voice, suspecting some sort of jest.

"*Ciertamente,* if one doesn't have charity, one at least can have fortitude."

"Brother," said Socorro, "it isn't very respectful to speak to *maman* like that."

"I meant nothing—"

"*Ay di me!*" sighed the dowager. "Let him jest, Socorro. I don't understand Rafael. I never did."

"He means something about everybody being equal. He is a democrat, *maman.*"

"I'm sure I don't understand a word of such nonsense—every one equal! That comes of writing poetry all the time. Of course, I understand poetry. A poet must say something new; and since the old poets have already said all the sensible things, there is nothing left for a new poet to do but to hatch out absurdities, such as that peons are the equal of aristocrats, or that one should be gored by a bull to broaden his vision!"

Señorita Miraflores rippled into her soft laughter at this, leaned over the bed, and pinched Rafael's finger.

At this point there came a ring at the bell, and a little later Señor Montauban entered. He was immediately appealed to. He stood, drawing off his gloves and listening, with his slightly bald head tipped to one side. He addressed his answer mainly to Socorro, with the gravity of a man trying to be brilliant before his sweetheart.

"That is the old conflict between theory and practice," he suggested. "The theory of human equality is very beautiful, and it may be true in some abstract way, but life itself is too intimate and personal for us to apply such standards. Our ideals, *maman*"—he turned to the dowager—"are very little more than the excellencies which life suggests but never realizes. They are what the best of our race wish. They are products of the heart, not the head."

The dowager turned to her son.

"Now that is clear, Rafael! Why don't you put such ideas as those into your poetry? I never ask Narciso a question but what he explains everything to me precisely as I thought it would be!"

"Do you take your religion on the same terms, *madre?*" inquired Rafael, as he lay smiling, with his eyes shut.

"Now, *hijo*, you know that I won't allow you to philosophize about religion in my presence."

"What started such a discussion?" asked Señor Montauban, glancing at Socorro.

Señorita Miraflores answered:

"Angelito invited us all to a dinner, and we have accepted. That started us talking about equality."

Señor Montauban nodded.

"*Pues*, that ought not to be without interest." He dismissed the topic, and turned to the sick man. "Rafael, did you ever complete that manuscript on 'The Gate'?"

"Yes—Socorro copied it out for me." He lifted his head to look. "Where is it, sister?"

As Señorita Jiminez rose to get Rafael's poem, the editor asked:

"I don't know whether to mention it or not after Rafael's accident, *señora*, but do you and Socorro want to go to the *corrida* on Sunday afternoon? Come along with us, too, Margarita. I want to fill up the press box with beauty."

"Of course I want to go!" cried Margarita. "But we must consider appearances." She leaned over her *fiancé* again, and pulled at his finger. "How do you think it would look, Rafael, for me to go off to see a bullfight just after you have been gored?"

"I?" ejaculated Rafael faintly, opening his eyes. "I think it would look very natural."

The dowager looked at her wounded son suspiciously.

"I never know exactly how to take you, Rafael. Natural! What do you mean by natural?"

"Why, *maman*, he means natural!" Margarita was pleased. "So we will go, Socorro. Rafael is nearly well."

Señorita Jiminez, at the other end of the room, let drop a fascicle of paper.

"*Pues*, yes," she agreed in a queer voice. "I suppose we might as well go—"

Her voice faded out in indecision, and her glance wandered up to the rapiers crossed on the wall.

No sooner had Angelito left the sick room than he fell into uneasiness about the conduct of the dinner which he had planned.

"*Sangre de Dios!*" he thought to himself. "That was a rash thing for me to do. In giving a dinner to aristocrats, there are a great many points about which I know little!"

He walked on down the *patio* toward his mother's room, meditating the uncertainties of his adventure. On the way down, he paused to look into his dining room, on the right side of the *patio*. A notion flitted through his head that he should order a profusion of flowers, but this idea was dismissed.

When the bullfighter entered his mother's room, he found old Ana handing a lottery ticket through her window to some customer in the street outside. He was instantly irritated. He watched in silence as the old peon woman ran a hand into a skirt pocket, drew out a handful of beggarly copper coins, and put the ticket and the change into the hand stretched into the window.

Not until the deal was finished did she see Angelito. Then she gave a faint start, but immediately her old face took on its obstinate expression.

The *torero* made no comment, but said in a flat voice that told of his anger:

"*Madre*, I wish you would prepare a dinner for to-morrow night."

The old woman lost her mulish expression in surprise at this request.

"Don't you get a dinner every night, Pancho?"

"*Seguramente*," replied her son, still flatting his tones in vexation; "but to-morrow night I have company."

"Who?" asked old Ana suspiciously.

"*Pues*, the *señora* and the *señoritas* in the front room."

"*Diablo!*" cried the old peon. "Those cats! Why did you invite them?"

"*Cà!* They were here in my *casa!*"

"Here in your *casa! Diantre*, yes, and they go about without so much as glancing at you. You might be a thousand miles away. They never see you—and in your own *casa*, too! But you stand twisting your head after her as if she was a processional in the cathedral! Pancho, you are the biggest fool I ever saw!"

"*Olà!* There is no use running on like that. Will you cook the dinner?"

"No, I will not!"

Angelito looked at his mother in frustration. She looked like a kind of ugly human post driven down in his path to keep him from advancing a step.

"*Entonces,*" he snapped, "I will go down to La India and buy a dinner!"

"What? Go out and buy a dinner? *Absoluto,* Pancho, you are gone mad indeed over this wench! Who ever heard of buying a dinner!"

"It is you who drive me to madness," declared Angelito somberly. "You refuse me this little dinner when I have to fight in the *circo* the day after to-morrow? *Olà,* who knows what will happen the day after to-morrow? You might think of that before you refuse me a little dinner for a few friends."

The old crone stood looking at the bullfighter for several minutes. Her expression slowly changed, and she made a despairing gesture.

"*Ay Maria,* Pancho, somehow we always manage to break each other's hearts! God in heaven knows I wish you would give up this bullfighting. You have enough money; but if you should marry this white-faced *bicho,* then, *seguramente,* your fighting will never end. All she would want would be the money you could give her. If she really loved you, Pancho, she could not endure to see you enter the *circo.* Holy Virgin, she would rather cut off her hand than to see you do so terrible a thing!"

Angelito had hoped to bring about some such reaction as this.

"Then you will make the dinner?" he asked in a kinder voice.

"*Sí, sí!*"

He pondered a moment.

"We will need some plates and silver, *madre.*"

"Plates and silver! We have always eaten out of plates, Pancho, and we have knives and forks and spoons."

"*Sí,* but I have been thinking of getting something for my table for a long time, *madre.* It is absurd in a great *casa* like this to have no silver."

"But, Pancho, you will make a beggar of yourself!"

"*Cà,* no," declared the bullfighter, pleased at having introduced the topic so deftly. "A single fight will make all the money back, and more, too. I wonder what I should have carved on my silver!"

"What do you carve on silver?"

"Oh, a crest, a motto, a figure, a shield, one's initials."

The old woman looked at him shrewdly, and then lowered her voice.

"Are you afraid they will steal your silver, Pancho?"

"*Huy!* No!" The son was disgusted. "It is a family mark—something the father of a great family puts on his plate, to pass down to his sons and grandsons. It is a little sign, *madre,* carved on one's plate, to show that life does not end with one *caballero,* but marches through him to his sons, and through them to his grandsons, and so on and on, like a soldier marching to war. It is not he, nor is it they, *madre,* but it is an invincible, immortal something which becomes him and them for a space and passes on; and only *caballeros* have it."

The old peon shook her head at her son.

"I am sure I don't know what you mean, Pancho; and I don't think you do, either!"

From this triumph over his mother Angelito hurried down to a jewelry store on Plaza Bolivar, to purchase his family plate. The jeweler was a fat, saddle-colored man with a polished black mustache and an unctuous manner. He showed the bullfighter design after design, some from Madrid, some from Paris, some of an English make from Birmingham.

Angelito chose plate of a Spanish style, and then explained to the proprietor of the *joyeria* that he wanted a motto carved on it—an inscription of some sort. At last the jeweler apprehended what the *torero* had in his head, and produced an old book on heraldry. Here were an endless number of the vaunting phrases which human beings had chosen to express their ideal of life. They were in all languages, for the emotion that prompted them is as broad as humanity itself—"Glory and grief," "*A cielo,*" "*Resurgam,*" "*Verité sans peur,*" "Honor and king," "*Semper fidelis,*" and so on, crest after crest, crystallizations of what life had meant for some series of human souls. Angelito chose, after the jeweler had explained the meaning of the phrase, "*Ad astra per aspera*"—"To the stars through difficulties."

The jeweler complimented him on his

choice, and later smiled as he engraved innumerable repetitions of "*Ad astra per aspera*" on Angelito's plate.

On the afternoon of the next day the tradesman dispatched a porter with a heavy box to the blue *casa* on Traposo. The porter was a peon, in flowing shirt, straw hat, and *alpargatas,* and he meandered along the *calles* with Angelito's family plate rattling in a pushcart.

X

NARCISO MONTAUBAN happened to be calling on the Jiminez family when Angelito's dinner was served, and the bullfighter conscripted him to the feast.

It became a question whether or not Rafael might be moved in to the table. There was considerable discussion on this point. Rafael's physician was consulted by telephone, and at last the poet was wheeled through the *patio* into the *comedor* and instated at the table in a black and yellow silk dressing gown.

They made a gay crowd, with Rafael getting better. Angelito sat at the head of the table, with Señora Jiminez on his right and Señorita Miraflores to his left. Socorro Jiminez and Señor Montauban were taking care of Rafael.

The bullfighter surveyed his guests and his table piled with viands, and pleasure vibrated through his breast. After the fashion of peons, the whole meal had been placed on the table at once. In the center were roasted chickens heaped with brown rice and garnished with peppers. Around this were boiled yammi in a great white mound on a big dish, a large bowl of fried plantains, brown and sirupy, and half gourds of guava jelly, which old Ana had turned out into finger bowls, and which glowed like topazes under the electric spray overhead. Tamarind preserves were in a ewer.

At each plate lay one knife, one fork, and one spoon, which were clearly meant for continuous service. All the silver, of course, was fire new, with the burr from the engraver's burin still roughening the letters of its ambitious motto.

"To the stars through difficulties!" Well, Angelito had reached the stars at last. The glitter of his silver, the gleam of his china—which he had also received that afternoon—were tiny fires which warmed his heart with the delight of new possession; and above the abundance and shine of his feast he saw the disturbing charm of Señorita Jiminez.

It was odd how the girl moved him. He did not see her as he saw his other guests. In some way her very appearance seemed to slip away from him if he withdrew his eyes from her face, even for a moment. This elusive quality forced him to glance at her again and again.

The other diners wore the most matter-of-fact aspect—the comely *señora,* the gay and pretty Margarita, the wan and handsome poet in his black and yellow dressing gown, and the dapper little editor with his slightly bald head. Now and then Angelito interrupted the conversation of his guests to press them to take more food. Old Ana moved about the table, keeping the wineglasses filled.

The sprightly Margarita was telling with much humor of her flight from the heron in the garden. Socorro Jiminez said she had not known that the *casa* had a garden. She asked if it contained any orchids, and began describing a very rare blue orchid which Rafael had brought back from the upper reaches of the Orinoco.

The girl's observation seemed to Angelito to be of the greatest moment. He assured her earnestly that there was a little garden in the rear of his *casa,* but it was a badly neglected spot, overgrown with wild guavas and a tamarind tree.

"And these tamarind preserves came from it," interposed Margarita. "Señor Angel's mother made them."

"Señor Angel's mother!" echoed the *señora.*

There was a little talk of the *torero's* mother. This made Angelito exquisitely uncomfortable. He said vaguely that his mother was very old, and that he carried the tamarinds to her.

"What amazes me," said Socorro, glancing about with her dark eyes, "is that this *casa,* the garden, this *comedor* in which we sit, the food we are eating, is all founded on bullfighting. Now isn't that strange? Just think, I am sitting here because Señor Angel risked his life in the arena! I eat this bit of bread because a charging bull grazed him. We are eating danger!"

"*Cà,* Socorro," said the *señora* in her deep voice, "it is an art. It is as if he had won his *casa* by painting pictures."

"He does paint pictures," declared Rafael, "the most luminous and dramatic pictures in the whole world. Sorolla himself can never get the brilliancy of a scene in the amphitheater."

"His pictures don't last very long," giggled Margarita.

"Brevity is their virtue," asserted Rafael, with more earnestness than his weakness justified.

"*Pues,* Rafael, that is a defect," said the dowager. "One can't study them."

"That is the point," declared the poet. "The response to beauty is an emotion. If one stops to study it, you intellectualize it, and your emotion vanishes. It is the evanescence of beauty that gives it worth. That is what gives all life its sense of pathos and sweetness. Look at Margarita—would she wring my heart with tenderness if she could never fade? Nobody could feel any real tenderness for an immortal being. Such a sentiment would be inappropriate. It would be like kissing the rock of Gibraltar."

"*Caramba, maman!*" cried Margarita. "What a boy you have reared! He is utterly impossible!"

"Rafael," returned the dowager gravely, "you must remember that all of us are immortal. Let us cease discussing any such topic."

"We were talking about bullfights," said Socorro, when Rafael refused to kiss Gibraltar. "I think I am becoming opposed to bullfights myself. There is a political party in Spain trying to abolish them over there, isn't there?"

"But they never will," declared Señor Montauban, with the ardor of a devotee. "The bullfight epitomizes the Spanish spirit. It avoids the mere brutal pain and dull security of pugilism. *Caramba,* I've wondered why the English and American pugilists don't take thumb and forefinger and squeeze each other's noses until one cried enough! That would not be any more undignified than beating each other with their fists, and the sport would then be entirely devoid of danger."

"But what's the use of danger?" asked Margarita impatiently. "I think it's awful. Think of Rafael risking his life as he did!"

"Danger," explained the editor smoothly, "prevents moral and intellectual stagnation in an individual or a nation."

"I'm sure danger wouldn't make me any better or brighter!" declared Margarita.

"It wouldn't? If you thought you were in danger now, you have no idea how swiftly your wits would begin to work. It would stir you up. All peoples have emotional depths which must be sounded at intervals if they are to hold their places in the world. When a nation comes face to face with danger or death, it purifies the national mind of trifles like the surge of a great black sea. That is why war, *señorita,* is always followed by a great renaissance, a reorientation of spirit."

"What has that to do with bullfighting?" inquired the *señora.*

"Everything. War is wasteful, *señora.* The sacrifice of life and wealth is too great. We Spanish people have found a more economical mode of purging our souls in the swift and actual danger of the *circo.* Because we have the bullfight, it is not necessary for Spanish nations to go to war. North America has her substitute in football, which kills a certain number of her young men every year, but football lacks two great philosophic factors which the bullfight possesses."

The editor paused here for the *señora* to ask what those two factors were.

"One is sincerity. The North American football players cannot openly strive to kill their rivals, and this lowers the whole world of football to the triviality of a game. No great nation can thrive on trivialities in a matter touching its profoundest moral needs. The other objection is the fact that the opponent of a football player is human, and of about equal strength with himself. This destroys the profound antithesis between man and nature, which finds its most complete symbol in tauromachy. In the *circo,* the bull represents the prodigious forces of nature—vast, furious, and brutal. It is as devoid of moral qualms as a cyclone or an earthquake. Pitted against this immense violence stands a man entirely without passion, trusting his life to his precision, coolness, and judgment. *Señora, señoritas,* that is the very graph of all human existence. We stand every moment of our lives opposed to terrific and brutal forces. Because the national sport of the Spanish peoples is the genuine battle to death between a bull and a man, the whole Spanish race finds itself more at home in the world than do less favored nations. Our philosophers look upon life with sincerer eyes; our artists see life and color more truly; our writers present life more frankly than do the equivocating novelists of the northern countries. Indeed, if I may say it, the two powerful cathartics which keep the Spanish soul free from all pettiness, worldliness, hypocrisy, and stagnation are our holy church and the bullfight. You, Señor Angel, are as truly a high priest in the service of God as the bishop before the altar. You perform the ancient rite of sprinkling blood upon the sand, whereas the priest uses merely the symbol of blood—water."

Señor Montauban delivered his peroration with great energy, and had seized his glass of wine, to drink to Angelito and the profession of tauromachy, when old Ana, who was standing behind Margarita, burst out:

"Holy Virgin, listen to that dried up little mango seed clattering away about what a fine thing it is to get killed when he's safe enough in the boxes! *Demonio,* you don't risk your hide, *señor,* for the sake of your soul, or for anybody else's soul. You don't—"

All the diners turned at this extraordinary outbreak from the serving woman. The editor got to his feet.

"*Señor!*" he cried to Angelito. "Do you allow your servants to insult your guests?"

The bullfighter was beside himself.

"Three thousand devils on horseback!" he shouted. "*Madr*—Ana, what do you mean interrupting my guests?"

"I mean he is putting you up to fight more bulls! Bah, a shriveled little toad like him!"

"Get out of here! Go!" cried the *torero,* growing dark with rage.

The old peon woman suddenly flung out her arms.

"Oh, *caramba,* what madness this is! This will lead to some terrible thing! No good can come of this! And you!" she flared out at the editor again. "Saying that a bullfighter is as holy as the bishop—you will fry in hell for that, you wicked aristocrat!"

The contumacious old crone turned and moved out of the *comedor,* waggling her head obstinately and leaving the guests in confusion.

Angelito had a dizzy sensation, as if he were sinking in space. His guests were rising from their places, and he mechanically followed their example. They came around saying things to him which he did not clearly follow. The *señora* was saying something about the insolence of servants these days. The bullfighter was apologizing incoherently to the editor.

Presently Angelito saw them go slowly out of the *comedor,* rolling Rafael in their midst. The *torero* was left alone in his dining room. His new china and silverware twinkled at him under the electric spray. On the haft of a silver ladle his eyes caught the newly engraved inscription which was to be the motto of his house—"*Ad astra per aspera.*"

XI

When the Jiminezes had retired to their room, and after Señor Montauban had made his adieus to them, the editor succeeded in getting a moment alone with Socorro in the entry of the *casa.* He drew her to him, and kissed her with the passion that small men feel for large women. As he did so, he murmured the conventional Spanish endearments—"*mi alma,*" "*pequeno cielo,*" and the like. *Pequeno* hardly seemed appropriate, since she was a trifle taller than he, and must have weighed more.

"You are preoccupied to-night," he observed presently. "*Cà!* That scene was enough to give any one a disagreeable farewell. It is my theory, Socorro, that a real servant is impossible, unless there is a clear-cut line of social demarkation between the master and the servant. Otherwise a man does not have a servant at all, but a boorish companion."

Socorro Jiminez, who stood with her hand on her *fiancé's* lapel, thought to herself:

"That is true—Narciso has a very clever head. I wonder why I don't appreciate him more highly! Everything he says is interesting. Perhaps we have been betrothed too long."

A moment later, when he took his leave, she submitted to his fervent embrace and bent her head a trifle to his kiss. She caught a faint, agreeable odor of fine cigars. He gave her waist and torso a little extra pressure.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked in a pettish tone.

"Nothing. I suppose this is a reaction from the strain of nursing Rafael."

"Yes, yes," he agreed more gently. He took her hand, held it until he was at her arm's length, and then touched his lips to it. "I'll be glad when you are back in your home, and these pretty fingers can make me some music, Socorro."

"Yes—it has been a siege here."

"*Hasta mañana!*"

"*Adios, pues!*"

Señor Montauban let himself out of the small panel in the big double entrance, and then Socorro could hear his small feet tapping briskly down the *calle*. The young woman stood for several moments in the entry, oppressed by a vague heavy feeling. As she slowly returned to the sick room, she glanced out into the *patio*, and saw that the whole back part of the *casa* was darkened. This increased her melancholy, though she did not know why.

When she reached the sick room, she found Margarita angry, and her mother very dignified toward Rafael, who was in bed again. Señorita Miraflores turned sharply to her future sister-in-law.

"Rafael," she began accusingly, "says all that food piled up on the table wasn't a display of bad taste and lack of refinement. Why, you know it was, Socorro! It took my appetite completely—and the silver!" She broke out laughing in the midst of her pique. "Every single piece used wrong! I had to think up a funny story and tell it to Señor Angel, so that I would have a reason to laugh."

"I say," explained Rafael soberly, "that if the sight of a large amount of food takes away Margarita's appetite, the trouble lies with her."

"I say peons make a banquet by piling on a lot of food, and nice people by serving a little at a time!" cried Margarita.

"And why?" demanded Rafael, lifting himself on his elbow. "Simply because we nice people, as you call us, have lost our simplicity. We have overstuffed and underworked ourselves. Why should the sight of a great deal of food be repellent, unless we have had some painful experience with much food? Our likes and dislikes are based on something. They don't just happen. Instead of a piled up plate looking piggish, the person who can't stand a piled up plate must have been piggish. He advertises his surfeit by asking for a very little at a time, like a sick man. That's what you call refinement, Margarita—having been a pig."

Margarita was on the verge of tears.

"Oh, don't argue with him, Margarita," advised the *señora*. "Let him turn everything around. He does it to show how bright he is."

"But, *maman*, everything he says is so silly!"

The dowager rolled her comely head in acquiescence.

"Men are like that, Margarita. His father was, he is, and Señor Montauban is more or less, though not so bad as Rafael. What Narciso was saying about priests and bullfighters — shameful! I thought that old woman was almost right. Socorro, my dear, you are going to have a lot to put up with when you are mistress of the Montauban château!"

"Look at money," proceeded Rafael, who, manlike, could not forsake his argument. "Nobody considers great piles of money in bad taste, simply because money has never made any one physically sick. It has made many a man mentally sick, I'll warrant; but our emotions are not based on reason, but on our physical senses."

"We were talking about food, not money!" snapped Margarita. "That's just like you, Rafael. You always jump the track!"

Rafael eased himself down in bed. He looked across at the women with the quirked lips and half closed eyes of a man disgusted by feminine stupidity. He thought to himself:

"Why do I ever speak a serious word to these women?"

As he looked at Margarita, she seemed a kind of pouting emptiness.

"I won't talk to them any more," he thought. "It is like quarreling with young children."

"I have no sympathy for Señor Angel, either," stated Socorro, who in some way had shifted the point at issue from the table to the host. "He is the one who really caused Rafael to get hurt; and then, after he did it, he brought Rafael here, instead of taking him properly to his own home. I haven't a bit of sympathy for him—none whatever!"

As she hotly insisted that she had no sympathy whatever, tears moistened Socorro's eyes, and a curious quiver flickered through her chest, as if she were about to sob.

"Why, he didn't do it!" cried Rafael, again flaring up in his friend's defense. "I made him bring me here; and as for causing me to get wounded, he flung himself on the bull's head and saved my life by risking his own. I was right down under the brute when Angelito leaped on it bodily. The bull charged halfway across the arena with Angelito wedged in between its horns before he stabbed it in the head and killed it."

"Well, he got you into it," Margarita argued. "It was his duty to get you out."

"Got me into it! Ten thousand devils, Margarita, shall I never become an autonomous human being? I tell you he tried to dissuade me from entering the *corrida*. He opposed every step I took, even down to the particular bull I fought, and now you say he got me into it. *Demonio!*"

The sick man turned his face to the wall and thought irritably:

"These imbeciles! I am going to have to live out my life with that little fool! By the sacred fiends of hell!"

Socorro Jiminez was so much disturbed that she could not trust herself to say more. She bade her family good night, and started through the *patio* to her own bedchamber.

As she passed through the colonnade, the darkness in the back of the *casa* intensified the sadness of her mood. The pitifulness of Señor Angel's dinner, the misconduct of his servant, his mistakes in serving food and using his silver, all filled her with an intense pathos. Topping all this came the revelation that Señor Angel had risked his life for her brother. The girl fumbled for her handkerchief and wiped away the tears, which she could feel wetting her eyelids. It seemed to her that never before in all her life had she loved her brother so tenderly or so intensely.

XII

On the following day the physician agreed that Rafael was sufficiently recovered to be removed to the Jiminez villa. That morning Señora Jiminez bade Angelito farewell, expressing her gratitude for his many kindnesses with such cold formality that it quite precluded any further intercourse between her family and the *torero*.

Señorita Margarita told him gayly that she would see him in the *circo* on Sunday afternoon. Señorita Socorro shook hands with the bullfighter and said that he had been very kind. The impression that remained with her longest was the pressure of his hard, rubbery hand over her own. It hurt her faintly, doubling the soft cartilage in her palm, and leaving pink finger marks on the back of her hand. After she was in the cab with Rafael and her mother, driving home, she had an illusion that her hand was still in the hard fingers of the *torero*, and once or twice she glanced down at the imprints he had left.

When Socorro had settled herself once more in the sunshiny villa, Angelito and the whole bullfighting world, which had risen up about her in the blue *casa* in such intimate fashion, now sank back and became a part of that obscure underworld of working folk whose labor, skill, and hazards supplied Paraiso with the necessities, pleasures, and diversions of its life.

Like the rest of her class, Señorita Jiminez thought little or nothing about this working world. She knew, of course, that it furnished everything that made life pleasant to her; but she had an idea that its people were created expressly to administer to her own group, the aristocratic group. This aristocratic group, she thought, formed the real substance of Caracan life. All the rest—the bakers, shopkeepers, tailors, *toreros*, and what not—were merely the underpinning which served to support this precious and significant minority of aristocrats. Naturally, among those who dropped into this ancillary world was the bullfighter Angelito.

Thus Socorro's home-coming dehumanized the very human and troubled world that she had found in the blue *casa* on Traposo Calle. Angelito was, after all, a bullfighter, a handsomely built man who supported a rather expensive *casa* by the extraordinary method of fighting bulls. It was a queer way to make a living. In fact, Socorro had the South American feeling that to *make* a living was queer, and, to be frank, rather gross. One should live on the rentals of an estate on the Tuy, or some such inconspicuous source of income, which one had inherited.

After Socorro had returned to her home, Señor Montauban visited the Jiminezes daily, as he had been doing for a long time. He listened to Socorro's piano playing, complimented her technical excellence, and compared her with Venezuela's great pianist, Teresa Carreño, with whom he was personally acquainted.

Señorita Jiminez esteemed her *fiancé* as rather a clever musical critic, for he was always closely attentive to the notes that she produced. He would sit for half an hour at a time—seldom longer than that, for he tired quickly—parsing the grammar of her musical phrases.

"No, Socorro," he would say. "A little more limpidity here, *mi alma!*"

Then he would walk over to the keyboard, and tap out the notes, for he played a little himself.

"That cadenza was not quite your usual string of pearls, *mi vida*," he would remark, and would show her on the score precisely which string of pearls he was talking about.

Señorita Jiminez always felt flattered if she escaped with only one or two such criticisms, yet somehow they annoyed her and frustrated her. She felt that Narciso was never listening to the music, but to her notes. He would stop her in the midst of a performance to correct a defect.

The real pleasure the editor derived from her playing came from this attitude of critical superiority, which he always assumed. The musical staff was to Señor Montauban so many parallel bars, upon which he performed critical gymnastics. Further than this, music appeared to him unnecessary.

Socorro, on the whole, was fond of the little editor. His slightly bald head looked distinguished to her. She often said to him, and at least partly believed it:

"Nearly all intellectual men are a little bald, Narciso."

She liked his philosophizings better than she liked Rafael's. They were more matter-of-fact, and not so badly timed. To move a woman, philosophy must be as accurately timed as the ignition of a twelve-cylinder car. Montauban felt this. In fact, his mind had a practical, finical cast which the girl found as congenial as the mind of another woman.

One objection to him was his tendency to gusts of surreptitious kisses and embraces. However, Socorro pondered that no lover was perfect; and, after all, his little gusts of amorousness seemed unnecessary rather than objectionable.

One day, in the midst of one of these outbursts, the girl questioned its good taste, and said that it reminded her of peons. The editor loosed her abruptly, and began a dissertation on the essential oneness of human emotions.

"The difference between persons," he said, "is mental, not emotional. Upon just such siroccos is founded the whole Spanish civilization. To question their essential dignity, or even their sacramental character, is to undermine the very foundations of society, and indeed of all life."

This disquisition left Socorro considerably chastened, and she made no further outspoken comments on the subject. After all, it is a poor wit who cannot defend his own prerogatives against the undisciplined attack of a girl. The best anthropologists hold that logic first appeared on this earth when some bald-headed caveman read the riot act to some cave maiden about her social obligations.

The Sunday afternoon following Rafael's removal to his home found the invalid well enough to be left with the servants in the villa, while Señora and Señorita Jiminez and Señorita Miraflores went with Señor Montauban to the bullfight.

By this time Socorro's complacent world had completely reoriented itself, and Angelito had vanished from it. The ladies walked down to the gate, where stood the editor's motor, and as Socorro established herself in the front seat beside Narciso, who drove his own car, she was filled with a sense of well-being.

The big car glided silently down the boulevard, in the shade of tropical trees. Occasionally Socorro got a whiff of the editor's aromatic cigar. In the rear seat the *señora* and Margarita were talking, and now and then Socorro caught an occasional word, such as "jade *cabochon*" or "silver sequins."

Narciso was telling Socorro something about Tito Monnico's new mural painting. The girl listened—not very attentively, but it pleased her to have her *fiancé* talk about pictures in such a sophisticated manner. He was a brilliant man, and he would make a brilliant and very desirable husband.

He was driving his car with his hat off, and it seemed to her that he never looked more distinguished. His features were fairly regular and finely carved. His hands on the wheel, one gloved and one ungloved, were small, yet muscular-looking. The thought flickered through her head, and warmed her face somewhat, that their children—she meant to have four—would be beautiful.

The municipal band was playing in Bolivar Plaza as the big, shining car nosed carefully around the crowded square on the way to the Nuevo Circo. The strains of music, the colorful crowd, the many salutes and hat tippings that Señor Montauban and his party received, all formed a part of a pleasing deference which Socorro felt doubly due her as a present Jiminez and as a prospective Montauban.

A little farther east they passed the low but massive cathedral. A priest, standing in the doorway, lifted his little round hat at sight of the motor. Señor Montauban eased the car to a murmuring halt.

"Do you go to the *circo* this afternoon, Father Ignacio?" he asked, across the narrow pavement.

Father Ignacio had the look of an athletic man gone to fat. His face was a wrinkled bronze. He bowed a "*Gracias,*" and came across the pavement, smiling, as Margarita opened the rear door and made room for him.

"Yes—I am to hold prayers for the *toreros,*" he said, extending a hand, which Margarita kissed. "I am afraid the *circo* will not be well attended to-day."

His voice, which rumbled like an orator's, spoke regret that any function which he blessed should not be well attended.

"You could hardly expect it," agreed Señor Montauban, starting the car again, "with the Spanish *corrida* right upon us. The *gente* are saving their *soldes* to get into that."

"Who do you think will be second *espada* to Juan Leon, Señor Montauban?" inquired the priest, with a deference due the editor of the single paper in Caracas devoted entirely to the sport of bullfighting.

"I know whom I am going to support through the pages of *Sol y Sombra.*"

"Ercolito?" inquired the *padre.*

A little stab went through Socorro at such a suggestion. She turned in her seat to face the priest.

"*Caramba,* no, *padre!* Not Ercolito, but Angelito!"

The priest smiled.

"You seem very earnest, daughter!"

Señora Jiminez explained that "this Angelito"—such were the words she used to describe the fighter—had done her dear Rafael a great service. The whole family felt most grateful to him, and would be glad to see him get the post of honor.

"I am glad you mentioned this," said the priest good-naturedly. "It happens that I know Señor Malestar. If the topic comes up between us, I will suggest that he should use Angelito as second *espada.*"

Socorro thanked the *padre* impulsively, and promised him a donation for the repair of the cathedral roof—that being, at the time, an object of alms.

A few moments later the automobile turned out of the narrow *calle* into the sunshot plaza before the bull ring. The ring itself was a great structure of red brick, finished in front like a castle. Beyond its gloomily ornamented façade the high walls curved away, as featureless as the walls of a prison. They were high, blank, and red, without a variation in the brick work to break their monotonous curve. The Nuevo Circo always gave Socorro a heavy, brutal impression.

The motor was parked a little distance from the castellated entrance. Señor Montauban, who held a press pass, did not visit the ticket window, where a little cue of *aficionados* stood in the sunshine, but led his party straight into the wide entrance, where an ascending platform led up to the level of the boxes. After climbing this, they came out on an immense concrete oval, which held a scattering of spectators in its innumerable boxes.

As Socorro followed Señor Montauban around a long passageway behind the boxes, and in front of the ascending tiers of ordinary seats, a number of acquaintances bowed to the party. Once Montauban paused to shake the hand of some government official.

"A very poor attendance, Dr. Sanchez," he said, glancing about the huge circle of empty boxes.

"It is the *hors d'œuvre* before the *plat du jour,*" smiled the doctor, referring to the coming Spanish *corrida;* "but in this sport, Señor Montauban, one doesn't dare miss anything."

"*Bueno! Bueno!*"

Montauban proceeded down the aisle to his own box, smiling. It always pleased him to hear any one praise the art of bullfighting.

Notwithstanding the smallness of the attendance, everybody was in good spirits, and Socorro Jiminez found her share of the general expectation and pleasure. The press box, which Señor Montauban occupied, was exactly in the center of the *sombra* side of the Nuevo Circo. Some ten feet below the balustrade of the box was the runway for the attendants of the bull ring. This in turn was fenced off by barriers from the great yellow arena.

At the southern end of the ring, the bull pens and the dressing room for the fighters had been housed under an immense proscenium for motion pictures. This huge structure was used when some very popular cinema was brought to Caracas.

The press box occupied the best position in the great edifice—a fact which renewed Socorro Jiminez's luxurious feeling of being well placed in life. All things gave her a sense of quiet pleasure—the bright yellow light which swept the amphitheater, and which was reflected from the opposite or *sol* side of the circle; the cool breeze that breathed down from the mountains over the boxes; the color and gayety of the few spectators.

She was, indeed, very well placed in life. Her family, her social position, her future career as the Señora Montauban, were perfectly assured. All she had to do was to live and enjoy all her prerogatives — the music, the spectacle, her clothes, the very feel of her own beautifully molded body. She was a very happy girl—or, at least she ought to be one.

The band broke suddenly into music, one of Yriade's sensuous and intricate nocturnes. It was not badly played. The tendrils of the melody immediately wound themselves around the girl's mood, rendering it more pensive and sweeter. Like most Spanish music, it was intense gayety based on sadness. In the orchestration were innumerable gay and sparkling effects, but its basic movement was passionate and sad. It recalled to Socorro what Rafael had said about tragedy and death at Angelito's unfortunate dinner.

She sat trying to recall her brother's words, when she felt Narciso's touch on her hand. She gave him a little impulsive pressure in return, but he was leaning toward her to say that he did not care for Yriade's melodramatic effects. Indeed, he was surprised at the conductor of the municipal band for selecting such music. He preferred the restraint of the classics.

Socorro felt faintly reproved for enjoying the music. It seemed to her that Narciso must be a very brilliant man indeed, perpetually intellectual, cool, and critical. She was a little relieved when he took back his hand and allowed her once more to relapse into the rhythm and the melancholy of the music.

Just as its mood suffused her once more, it ceased. Came a little interval of silence, then the band broke forth in a military march. The southern doors of the arena opened, and in came the parade of the fighters.

They made a brilliant spectacle as they marched around the arena. Socorro leaned forward, gazing at them, and presently she picked out Angelito at the head of the procession. She breathed a trifle faster, and became conscious of a faint nervous play through her chest.

The brilliant regalia of the *torero* gave him a strange look which rather pleased the girl. She was pleased at the change from his commonplace home wear. She had forgotten how resplendent he had always been in the bull ring.

The train of men—*toreros, banderilleros, monosabios*—and the two black mules, with their bright harness, forming the tail of the cue, made a colorful procession against the yellow sunlit wall on the opposite side of the amphitheater. They gleamed and glowed like a peal of bold music. They were unafraid. They were going to risk their lives as poor Rafael had done.

Her brother's accident had altered the meaning of a *corrida* for Socorro. It had changed it from a spectacle into a very poignant and dangerous reality.

Her eyes returned, fascinated, to the unfamiliar figure of Angelito. She noted the bold way in which he walked and swung his cloak. His demeanor had seemed so repressed, and even constrained, in the blue *casa!* She recalled the fiasco of his dinner, and his darkened *patio* after his insolent servant had ruined his feast; but here he was now, with rapier and cloak, about to meet the bulls as gallantly as ever.

It seemed a courageous thing to do. If Socorro had been shamed by disorderly servants, she did not believe she could ever march at the head of a procession again.

She continued watching the *torero* as he came around the northern arc of the boxes. By this time he was close enough for her to see his face; and instantly she knew, with a little thrill, that he meant to fling up his cloak on her balustrade. It gave her a peculiar pleasure to know that a *torero* meant to honor her with his cloak.

As he came still closer, she could see that he was looking directly at her. He was quite different from the silent man she had seen in the blue *casa*. The black eyes in his bold, swarthy face dealt her a sharp emotional blow. The shock increased the titillations in her chest until Socorro hardly knew whether they were pleasant or unpleasant. She gazed back at him almost perforce.

Again it appeared as if she had never before seen this man in his brilliant carmine cloak and his little black *mona* stuck on the back of his head—this man whose eyes held hers by some extraordinary power. She had not known there was such a man. Her sense of surprise at him and at her own self increased.

Señor Montauban selected this inopportune moment to say that the procession of the fighters always held for him a very medieval atmosphere, and that the poetry and romance of the bullfight was exactly this mellowness of time and custom, this—

Without taking her eyes from Angelito, she begged in a breath:

" Please don't talk, Narciso, till they get past!"

At that moment the bullfighter was directly under her box. The wistfulness of his face looking up at her, the bronze column of his neck, spreading into powerful shoulders and deep chest, seemed sharply intimate to Socorro. The very *mona* over his bullfighter's cue took on part and parcel of this sympathetic intimacy. She hoped from the depths of her heart that he would not get hurt in this *corrida.*

At that moment Angelito, still looking at her, swung off his cloak, and with an easy movement sent it up to her. She reached out impulsively and caught the carmine garment. The next moment a strong perfume was all about her.

Margarita leaned over and helped her friend to spread the *torero's* rich cloak on the balustrade.

" It's very nice of Señor Angel to honor us!" smiled Margarita. " Doesn't he look splendid in that dark red suit?" She leaned farther, and murmured privately in her companion's ear: " Did you ever see such powerfully turned calves?"

She glanced gayly in Socorro's eyes, and then resumed her conversation with the *señora.*

When Angelito flung up his cloak, the other players followed his example, and the whole oval was decorated with bright splashes of color. The fighters then broke their formation, and went running out into the arena to await the entry of the first bull.

Socorro leaned over the balustrade, watching this familiar phase of the bullfight, and nervously smoothing the velvet cloak under her fingers. The strong, intimate perfume of the garment rose up about her. It was a mannish odor.

It struck her that Señor Montauban never used perfume. Naturally he would not. It was not " nice." As she continued moving her fingers over the cloak, the pile of the velvet sent delicate tremors running up into her hands and arms and chest.

The band ceased playing, and there came a blast from the trumpeter. Socorro and every one else in the arena leaned forward, looking steadily at the bulls' entrance.

The next moment a door opened under the great proscenium. It was a little black rectangle in the sunlight. Suddenly, in it, appeared the head and shoulders of a bull. A man on the stage above the opening hurled down two steel-tipped rosettes. The next instant the animal lunged into the arena, leaping high in the air and coming down stiff-legged, in an effort to jar loose the rosettes.

Instantly the *banderilleros* started running at the bull, flinging out their crimson capes as they went. An instant later the beast charged a man near the center.

Socorro leaned forward and followed this stage of the game intently. A sudden unusual interest in the fight filled her. Then, in the midst of these preliminary passes, a vague premonition of disaster formed in her mind. She was afraid the bull would hurt some of the *aficionados.* She stared at the lunging animal. Its heavy, convex neck, with its tremendous tossing power, appalled her. An upsweep of those horns could destroy any living thing!

At every charge of the bull, the girl gripped the bright cloak under her fingers. When a player held out his cape and allowed the huge animal to storm under it, a tingle went through Socorro's body as if some one had struck a harp string in her breast.

It seemed to the girl that something was wrong with her. Never before had she been so moved, so excited, by mere cape play. Her sense of danger, of imminent tragedy, grew sharper and sharper, as if some one were running a scale on a piano, higher and higher.

It seemed to Socorro that soon she must come to the limit of her endurance, when there came the usual pause, after the *banderilleros* have finished playing the bull, and immediately before the *torero* comes out alone to kill it. The interval passed, and then the excited girl saw a carmine figure advance over the yellow sand.

She leaned forward, with her lips apart, and the arena seemed to swing slightly under her eyes. She breathed short breaths through her open lips. She saw that single gay figure advancing on the bull. That was all she saw. The sight absorbed her eyes, her breath, her nerves. A great circle of blackness seemed to surround the *torero* and the bull, but in its center the two figures stood out in intense illumination.

The carmine figure stamped its foot, swung its scarlet cape; the bull charged. As the animal dashed under the outstretched arms, it seemed as if a terrific blow was struck upon every chord in Socorro's bosom. The circle of darkness around man and bull wavered, almost closed.

The bull wheeled, and was charging again. The man either was or was not stepping aside. The vacillating circle of blackness closed gently over its brilliant and tragic center, as if some one had softly closed the diaphragm of a camera.

The next thing Socorro knew, she heard her mother's excited voice crying:

"Loosen her collar, Margarita! A little water there, Narciso!"

Then she became conscious that her face was wet. Señor Montauban was saying:

"She has worn herself out nursing Rafael. This excitement was too much for her."

Some one was chafing her hands, and Margarita's voice was quavering:

"Socorro, darling, do open your eyes! Can't you hear me? It's Margarita!"

When Socorro opened her eyes, she found herself stretched out on three seats in the box. With a great effort she lifted her head, and saw the black mules dragging the dead bull out of the arena.

Applause broke out in other sections of the amphitheater. The herald blew a blast on his bugle, to proclaim the human victor in the fight. The band burst into a mist of music.

Señora Jiminez was saying that they must go at once. Socorro could hardly realize that she had fainted. She attempted to persuade the party to remain through the *corrida*. She tried to get her mother and Margarita to stay in the box and let Señor Montauban take her home in his motor; but the other women would not hear of it.

"This is a punishment for going off and leaving Rafael!" declared the *señora,* rather awed by the swiftness of the divine disapproval. "I felt something was coming all the time!"

"There will be a lot of gossip about this," wailed Margarita. "You know what I mean—our coming to the *circo* as we did."

She clattered away, holding one of Socorro's arms, and the little party made its way along the aisle behind the boxes to the great castellated entrance of the Nuevo Circo. Señor Montauban was on the other side of the invalid. He made little explanatory speeches to his friends as he passed their boxes:

"Overwrought from nursing her brother"—"unstrung from lack of sleep," and so on.

There was something about the dapper little fellow that was distasteful to Socorro's shocked nerves—his small stature, perhaps, or his arm about her waist. She was glad when they got to the motor, and he loosed her. She took the priest's place in the back seat, leaning back in a corner, with Margarita's arm about her shoulders. Señor Montauban occupied the front seat alone as he drove back to Paraiso.

(*To be continued in the February number of* MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE)

AFTER ALL

AFTER all we did and said,
Can it be our love is dead?
Sweetheart, can it be that this is
Then the end of all our kisses?

Ah, the bitterest of the sorrow,
Not the lack of love to-morrow—
Love, they say, can never last—
But that it should end this way
Makes a mock of yesterday,
Takes all sweetness from the past!

Oliver C. Moore

Melissa of the Devil's Own

DESTINY HAD STACKED THE CARDS, BUT THE STRANGER FROM THE WEST CALLED THE CRUEL BLUFF

By Dorothy Brodhead

HE was a stranger. Melissa Shelden gathered the visible details of him into her first rapid, appraising glance. He was attractive, and yet something inexplicably formidable lurked beneath the surface of him.

Lean and sun-bronzed to the hue of copper, he wore clothes such as no man continued to wear who had sunk to the level of "belonging" at the Devil's Own. Also, his keen eyes smiled as frankly as his firm-lipped mouth.

But Melissa did not smile back at him. Abruptly, her startled memory had crowded past him and was confronting the only other occasion when such a stranger had ventured within the lawless boundaries of this coal-mining village. By her sudden physical weakness, after all these months, at the mere sight of the same type of man, she knew that she would never be able to wash her mind clean of the horror of that other time.

She forced herself to rise from where she had been sitting at her desk, and to go forward to meet the intruder.

"My name is Stephen Jayde," he informed her pleasantly, from the threshold. "I represent a manufacturing company on this railroad line that would like to get in touch with owners of independent mines, like this one, in order to get shipments of coal from them direct. Our local coal agents won't give up a ton, and we're badly in need."

Right then, she knew that he had lied. No man with this man's poise and assurance and obvious experience would come miles off the beaten track of travel to do business with the Devil's Own.

But she answered him pleasantly. There was that about his even graciousness that defied disapproval.

"This is only a colliery office, where we keep supplies. All the sales business is done from the main office, in Coal City. It's too bad you didn't find that out before coming so far."

Melissa Shelden kept the books at the Devil's Own coal breaker. She had begun learning to keep them when her handwriting was a wide, childish scrawl, and her feet, from the height of her father's big office chair, didn't touch the floor. Each year she had taken over more and more of the official burden until she was shouldering it all; and yet never, all through those years, had she truly "belonged" at the Devil's Own.

Now, as keeper of her trust, she was watching Stephen Jayde uneasily. He did not seem disappointed with her answer; nor was he disturbed, as might have been expected, at learning that he had traveled thirty miles off the route of civilization, with nothing to gain thereby. He glanced genially around the interior of the little office.

"You mine a lot of coal here, don't you?" he questioned cheerfully.

"Yes—the veins run large, and the coal is fine. If it wasn't so, I expect the mine would have been abandoned long ago."

"Why? Because it is so isolated?"

"Ye-es, and because the settlement is so notoriously lawless. Our isolation, of course, is to blame for that. No respectable workmen will come to live at a lone, stranded breaker like this."

"I think you're wrong about that," he disagreed simply. "Some of the nicest little communities I know have grown up around isolated mines and factories. I have in mind a little mine out West. In fact, I have an interest in it myself. I live there, and run the mine; and the place is a paradise alongside of this. I wouldn't let my poorest men live in such hovels as appear to be furnished for the best of yours. I suppose this nearest one to the breaker is the foreman's house. It seems to be the best of the bunch. That is to say, it isn't filthy, like the rest, but it's due to fall to pieces soon. My shack out West is only one story high, and has three rooms, but say, it is comfort and cleanliness clear to the corners! Why—"

He checked himself. The strained intensity of the girl's silence had sunk into his consciousness at last.

When he became silent, she spoke.

"I think you said you represented a concern on *this* railroad line. This, you know, is Pennsylvania."

II

He made no effort to defend his detected falsehood. His eyes dropped away from hers, and his face grew sharply sober. Then, with quiet dignity, he forced his gaze back to her face.

"I suppose I'm a darned fool," he admitted quietly. Then his face broke irresistibly into its old smiling cheerfulness. "You see, I'm a flat failure as a liar—not used to handling anything but the truth. Anyway, I'm so out and out loony about that little mine out there that I might have known I couldn't keep it from cropping up in any conversation!"

He paused.

"That particular slip didn't matter," Melissa told him quietly. "I haven't believed you from the first."

"Foolish of me to run this place down to *you,* anyway. It's your father who is the big boss here, isn't it? Runs the mine, the company store, the post office, and—"

"And me," she finished for him, bitterly.

Her red lips met in a soft, full line, tapering delicately at the ends. Her dark eyes, resting on the savage landscape outside the window, were heavy with brooding. They held and betrayed the tragedy of forced submission to the fate that had snared her, even while the delicious poise of her small head distinctly challenged it.

She was worth a man's looking at; and Jayde looked at her, sobering by the second.

Suddenly he motioned to a chair.

"Sit down, please," he requested.

When she complied, he dropped into a sitting posture also, on the edge of her desk.

"You're Melissa Shelden," he mentioned quietly.

"How did you happen to know that?"

"I suppose you know that there exists a habit among the more restless miners—the habit of going West when they tire of the East, and then, when they've worked in the Western coal mines until they're sick of it, flopping back to the Eastern mines again. They keep this up indefinitely. It happens that several of your restless laborers have come to my settlement. You see, I still stick to my second story, for it's the truth. You can cross out the first one. To get back to the subject, every Devil's Own miner I ever hired talked of you."

"I try to be a friend to the workmen who deserve it," she admitted simply.

"You've evidently done better than that," he said. Her eyes fell, and her flush rose under his steady gaze. "That traveling gang of vipers love to profane whatever they touch. I'm glad they had met one woman whom they couldn't desecrate, and didn't even wish to malign!"

She stirred in sudden glad confusion. She understood.

There was a silence. Jayde broke it with smooth skill.

"How did your father ever come to settle here?" he asked.

"Because, unfortunately, he let himself start, going down hill, and never stopped until he reached the bottom. The Devil's Own is about as far down as a man can go. My mother thought it her duty to follow him patiently from one level to the next. Finally she died here, and left me to live here. Of course, I'm safe enough. However father may treat me, he will protect me. He is indeed the boss here. The company is mighty glad to get hold of such a man for a place like this, and they offer him every inducement to keep him here. He knows how to mine coal, and he is strong enough to handle the gang."

"What are the workmen here—mostly foreigners?"

"Riffraff of every kind. Mr. Jayde, this is an unthinkable place!" Her voice quickened jerkily. "I've seen things here that would turn your soul sick."

By the look on her face, her fancy was seeing them still. Jayde did not miss her sudden gray intensity.

"What things?" he asked.

"If they knew that I told, they'd kill me, I guess. For one thing, a year ago this month they murdered a man, in spite of all my efforts to save him."

Jayde's fingers, which had been casually fretting a blotter, became ominously quiet. Not a muscle moved in his face, and his eyes never left hers.

"What sort of man?" he asked.

"A stranger, like you. He came and said he was a mine inspector—wanted to look through our requisitions, or something like that."

Still he did not move or leave off watching her.

"That same day some money was stolen from some of the men. They accused him of having taken it. They got in touch with headquarters, and learned that he was not a mine inspector, as he had said. They caught him."

Her sentences were coming with increasing difficulty.

"I got to him, and tried to hide him until their frenzy should have passed; but they found him—hunted him down."

Suddenly she stopped with her arm upraised before her eyes, as if to shut from view something unendurable.

He had come closer to her, silently.

"Go on!" he commanded.

Suddenly, above the barrier of her upraised arm, her eyes shot questioningly to his.

"Have—have you any connection with the police?"

He instantly grasped the significance of her question.

"So the police never got the crowd that did it?"

She seemed to retire behind some sort of guarded barricade.

"No one from here reported it, naturally. I've thought, since, that the stranger probably had no one closely interested in him—no one who knew his plans well enough to suspect just where he might have disappeared. Anyway, no inquiry was ever made. And now," she added thoughtfully, "I guess it is I who have been a fool; but, oh, don't you understand why I am telling you this?"

Stephen Jayde shook his head.

"I am trying to warn you—to save you from what happened to him!"

III

Jayde's face softened. Then his eyes crinkled into a sudden genial smile of amusement.

"And why do I need saving?" he asked.

"Why, you have already lied to me. You aren't what you say you are, so I don't suppose you have come for any good. They'll kill you, if you've come to do them any harm!"

He continued to smile.

"Do I look like a suspicious character?"

She shook her head.

"But neither did that other man," she countered quietly.

"And are you sure that he was a thief?"

"No, I am not sure; but the money was gone, and he was here under false pretenses. It looked bad. You may be the opposite of a criminal; but if you belong to the police, they'll have no less desire to shoot you. The Devil's Own is naturally suspicious of strangers, because it has so much to hide."

"Thanks for the tip. About this other man—do you mind telling me what he was like?"

"He was the same type of man you are, but he wasn't so strong and healthy. He was slender and delicate, and he wore a beard. If he hadn't been sickly, I think he'd have succeeded in getting away. He was almost dead with weariness when they found him and brought him back." She tilted her head into a poise of sharp defiance. It was as if she were protecting something from the censure of his thoughts. "Just because you are strong enough to fight, I don't want you to think he was a coward because he couldn't!"

Her manner brought a sudden blaze of understanding into his face. Instantly he was over her, his eyes delving into hers.

"Did he mean anything to you—that stranger?" he demanded, with unmistakable significance.

She was visibly taken aback.

"Why, not at first — that is—" She stopped floundering, and the charm of her defiance came back. "I'll do better than you did," she declared, with a touch of annoyance. "I'll tell the truth. He came to mean so much to me in the few hours I knew him that—well, before then, I'd had just one desire on earth, and that was to get away from this place. Since then I haven't cared whether I ever get away or not, because he won't be anywhere I might ever go!"

"And why should you be ashamed to tell me that?" he chided indulgently. "Things often happen that way—with all of us."

"I am not ashamed!" Evidently her annoyance was mounting. "And now don't you think you had better go? We pay here at noon, and I shall be very busy."

"Certainly," he complied obligingly. "I won't come back until about two o'clock. You'll probably be through by then. Where can I get a bite to eat?"

"There is a lunch room at Hazelhurst, the nearest railroad point from here. You must have come through there to get here."

"Yes, by motor cycle. I left my machine down below the settlement. I'll ride down and get lunch, and come back later."

She stopped him.

"Why are you coming back?"

"To transact my business, of course. I haven't even begun."

He went down the rough board steps and struck out rapidly across the black culm that carpeted the clearing, pausing at the farther edge to wave his hat in gay farewell. Undaunted by the fact that she did not permit herself to be visible, he gave every indication of suspecting that she hovered just inside the doorway, watching his every move.

When he had disappeared around the corner of the tool shed, she came out upon the dilapidated wooden porch. For several minutes she stood there, seemingly intent upon the slovenly outlook, which was peopled by the occasional black figure of a miner crossing the clearing, or by an unkempt, barefooted woman approaching or departing from the company store.

Melissa was wondering if Stephen Jayde would really come back. She was trying to content herself with the belief that he wouldn't, because nobody ever did.

IV

She did not realize how long she stood there. In her abstraction, she was scarcely aware of the figure that lurched out of the black entrance which sloped into the mine. It was in a daze that she saw the little miner's lamp flickering on the front of the man's cap, that she saw him stop and remove the headgear and blow out the light.

He lurched on again, with the peculiar sidewise hitch in his walk that denoted her father; but it was a distinct shock to her senses when she heard his voice at the foot of the steps — a voice flavored with the sharp, angry curses that had come to be a part of his daily speech. He was always ill-tempered of late.

To-day her quick, searching glance discovered an additional source of violence, for his eyes were bloodshot from overindulgence in his secret supply of poor liquor. His mustache was long, tangled, and soiled above the cruel scar that was his mouth.

"What the devil you standin' there moonin' about? We pay at noon, and it's half past eleven now."

She shuddered. The night following pay day was always a hideous orgy at the Devil's Own. While it lasted, she habitually locked herself into the decrepit dwelling which Jayde had specified as "due to fall to pieces soon," and waited anxiously for dawn to end the crazed debauchery in drunken slumber.

"Who was the guy Maguire told me you had here a while ago?" her father questioned suspiciously, as he followed the girl inside.

Caught off her guard, she took refuge in Jayde's own lie.

"Somebody wanting to arrange to buy coal by direct shipment."

Like herself, he, too, saw through the flimsy pretext.

"Why didn't you send fer me to talk to him? He was probably some low down trickster like that other—"

He stopped, and became sullen. There was an unwritten law of silence concerning that other stranger at the Devil's Own.

Silas Shelden attended to various duties about the room, and finally turned to get the bag of currency for which Melissa was already preparing crisp little envelopes beside the open barred window where the paying always took place. He searched excitedly for a moment.

"Where's the money?" he questioned.

"On the other desk."

Without turning around, she gave a little backward fling of her head toward a desk beside another window, across the room.

"It's not here!"

"Why, it must be."

She now turned, startled.

But it was not! They searched together, moving furniture, overturning things in general, but without success.

Shelden's smoldering fury broke forth. His words blazed, hot and vile, till finally they spent themselves and died down into ominous, brooding silence.

Melissa, accustomed to his rages, never let his violence for a moment deter her search. She searched straight on, though only for the satisfaction of having done so, for she knew, in her suddenly sickened heart, that the thing she sought was not there. She knew, too, what would come next.

It came.

"That stranger!" Silas Shelden pronounced his convictions. "The *second* lyin' whelp!"

His scalding fury began to pour forth once again. At times he seemed a raving maniac, who did everything but pound Melissa with his huge flying fists. He denounced her for having admitted the man, and cursed her for having allowed him to depart.

Nothing that he said created as much bitterness in her as the mere possibility of Stephen Jayde's guilt—the guilt behind his gay, attractive smile. For she knew that the moments she had spent in reverie, after he turned out of sight behind the tool shed, had given him time and opportunity to slip around to the exposed window under cover of the outbuildings, and to take the precious bag, which he had undoubtedly seen and noted when he was inside.

That same opportunity had been open to any one else who might have watched for it; but the Devil's Own could never be induced to see it that way.

Her father's wrath slowly died down into crafty scheming. He summoned his head miner, a gigantic half-breed negro, and ordered him to take two henchmen and a team of mules, and to scour all the roads and trails in the vicinity of the Devil's Own. He gave cunningly conceived directions for making the net of their search secure and cutting off the fugitive's escape.

Melissa, listening, felt as if all the blood were being slowly drained out of her heart; for it was thus they had begun that other man hunt with its unforgettable end.

She wished that her father would report the robbery to the State police. That would bring troopers to the Devil's Own, and thus would at least protect Stephen Jayde's life from violence, in the event of his capture.

Evidently Shelden feared that a visit from the police might disclose other things not meant for disclosure. He had resolved to handle this matter himself; but Melissa knew that he was nervous by the abrupt sounds of his restlessness, although she did not look at him once, as the slow minutes dragged themselves away.

She stood with her back to the room, and stared thoughtfully through the window to where straggling groups of miners, black with coal dirt, were assembling at their usual gathering place to wait for the disbursement of wages to commence. Then, with a stab of terror, she saw something else. The returning mule team, with its savage guardsmen, was bringing Stephen Jayde!

Her heartbeats seemed to fill her whole body with unendurable commotion as the conveyance halted at the porch. Jayde sprang out with apparent willingness, and accompanied his captors up the steps. They all filed into the room, and the half-breed began to explain.

"He seen us comin', and hid his haul somewhere. I guess we can make him tell where he put it. We got our own ways o' draggin' it out of him!" he added, with a touch of malevolence. "Tryin' to sneak off, he was, on one o' them shiny new bicycles with an engine in 'em. Almost made it, only we got there first!"

Shelden nodded understanding and approval. Melissa looked away from him, partly from horror of the cruelty in his face, partly because she sensed the question he was preparing for her.

V

She looked straight at Jayde, and her eyes were wide and black in the ivory mask of her face. Meeting her gaze with steady composure, he smiled — actually dared to smile.

Then came the question.

"Hey, M'lissa, is this the guy that was here a little while ago?"

A thought came zigzagging through the chaos of her mind:

"They didn't find the money on him. If I lie, maybe I can save him!"

Accordingly, with no sense of guilt, but only an overwhelming fear that her falsehood might betray itself, she heard herself saying:

"No, this isn't the man. This isn't the same man at all."

The smile on Jayde's face was almost extinguished in amazement. A puzzled frown gathered across his forehead as he turned and faced Shelden above the level of the girl's head. Shelden must have noticed that telltale change of expression.

"Maybe I can help solve your difficulty," Jayde told him evenly, "if some one will tell me what it is all about. Why am I seized and brought back here? I want an explanation!"

"It's you that's goin' to hand out the explanation, young feller!"

The girl was aware of the sneer swelling in her father's voice. Then, somehow, through his sinister pause, she became aware that his silence held a gathering danger to herself. As if by the power of some horrible fascination, she felt her gaze snared to her father's face. She was suddenly stricken, her very soul was whipped into torture, by the menace in his narrow gaze.

"You — little — liar!" he accused ominously. "Think you'll lie him out of it, do you? Fallen for the good looks of 'im, have you? Well, you'll fall fer somethin' else!"

But Jayde had stepped quietly between her and the descending blow, and it was Jayde's blow that landed first, on Shelden's jaw. Half drunk as he was, the mine boss went sprawling on the floor. With his downfall, a sudden war of fists was let loose in the room.

Stephen Jayde could fight! Melissa, forcing herself into the corner behind the desk to escape the mêlée, even in her crazed terror could not fail to note the swiftness and power of his blows. She remembered that she had recognized that formidable ability in him when he first came up the steps. He had carried a sharp suggestion of muscles of steel lurking under his tailored clothes. Those clothes were badly damaged now, and there was a purplish mark across his face; but the half-breed and the men supporting him were no better off, while Silas Shelden was obviously out of the combat for some minutes to come.

Just then Melissa chanced to glance through the window and glimpse the men gathering in the clearing awaiting their pay. It was a tense, anxious mob, subtly aware of something gone wrong. When it should learn that this disorder arose from the disappearance of money needed for the weekly carousal, no authority would be able to restrain its rage.

Keeping close to the wall, she slipped around to the opposite side of the room, unnoticed in the scrimmage, and opened the door leading into the breaker. Then, tense and alert, she waited an opportunity.

Jayde was still fighting them off, but she knew he could not continue to do so much longer. Her constant dread was that he would fail to dodge one of their slashing blows, or that the half-breed would force him into a terrible, irresistible clinch.

She saw the half-breed stagger back from a blow on the chin. He slipped and fell. Simultaneously, his two henchmen turned toward the door. With the overthrow of their leader, they had a single feverish impulse to summon the mob to settle this powerful stranger.

It was in that second's lull of battle that she caught Jayde's arm, and, signaling frantically for silence, pulled him, visibly puzzled, through the open door. Promptly she slammed it shut and bolted it behind them.

"There's a coal car on the siding. It will shoot you down to the main line in two minutes. From there, maybe you can get away before they overtake you!"

"But I don't want to run away!" he protested. "I've committed no offense. What do they think I've done?"

"Stolen the pay money. You don't know them as I do. They'll kill you for it! Please go! It's your only chance."

"Yes, I guess they would kill a man—unheard," he decided aloud, and followed her through the lower passages of the breaker.

"Out here!" she panted.

They emerged through an outer door at the opposite side from where they had entered, and came upon a siding.

"Good! There's only one car here—an empty," she said. "They'll have no other to follow you with. Get a pinch bar under those wheels, quick! Then jump on and —oh, hurry, hurry—quick!"

She was forcing a pinch bar into his hands.

"All right," he agreed; "but you must go with me. I simply will not leave you behind to a tribe of devils like those. I know what you are, through what I have heard; but you will have to take me on trust. I'll play square!"

He waited for a precious ten seconds, while she digested her amazement.

"It is the only condition under which I'll go," he reminded her quietly.

VI

Without a word, Melissa began climbing the steps of the car. Jayde helped her over the side.

"Please hurry—please!" was her only comment.

He put the pinch bar to work. The car was of the gondola type, its floor sloping toward the center. At the ends it was shallow, and, clinging there, standing upright, her head and shoulders came above the top. She watched, scarce breathing, while she waited for him to get the ungainly thing started.

He did, at last, but it moved with despairing slowness, crawling, inch by inch, down the slight incline toward the steeper grade farther on.

Jayde swung himself up on the rear end of the car.

" It 'll pick up speed, of course," the girl's strained voice encouraged; " if only —if only no one sees us before we get under way!"

He nodded silently, and watched the track meandering slowly out behind them from beneath the wheels.

" If only—" she began again, and stopped.

The mob was upon them! Black figures that must have broken through the bolted door came forth from the breaker, piling ever faster over the narrow threshold, hurling themselves on at breakneck speed. Other men were running around the corner of the building.

She recognized them all, coal-smudged faces metamorphosed with rage. She knew, too, in the first awful second, that this creeping car could not possibly gain sufficient speed to escape.

Stephen Jayde promptly vaulted over the side and into the inclosure beside her. From there he tried to fight them off with his pinch bar. One and another's grasp was pried loose from the framework; one after another was hurled off in trying to scramble aboard.

But there were too many of them! It was one man against the swarming horde of the Devil's Own. Melissa saw that she could not avert the inevitable finish.

So overwhelming was the immediate tragedy into which she looked that she failed to see the cruelty of her own personal tragedy, just behind it—the fiendish, living fate that would befall her for the part she was playing in trying to free this man. What would happen to her afterward did not seem to matter. The only thing in the world that concerned her was what was going to happen to Stephen Jayde now!

The pursuers were struggling aboard faster than he could push them off. In desperation, the girl glanced about for some means of help. There was nothing but the black, desolate hillside stretching away on either side of the crazy little railroad line, a few sparse, hardy bushes here and there, a man—

Suddenly she screamed, and her sharp gesture of amazement sent every eye unconsciously to the spot she pointed to—a spot where a man was scurrying for shelter into some scanty bushes. He was an ill clad, stoop-shouldered creature, with a black valise in his grasp. It was the dilapidated old satchel that had for years carried the pay roll money from the bank in Coal City to the Devil's Own.

" There is the thief!" she gasped.

Already the black figures were dropping silently from the moving coal car and dashing away in pursuit of the robber.

Swiftly, decisively, Jayde vaulted over the side of the car, dropped to the ground, and spragged the wheels, which came to a reluctant halt.

" Come, get out!" he commanded gently. " We are going back to see the finish of this affair."

He lifted her to the ground.

Off to their left, the fugitive had been captured, and was being dragged up the hillside toward the breaker.

The girl was aware of the new trend of Jayde's anxiety.

" The thief is one of the men. They don't hate him as they do a stranger. They won't do him any real harm," she said.

" Well, I'll hand him over to the police," he promised grimly.

Together, they reached the breaker office and pushed their way through the crowd. Shelden, obviously shaken, but unquestionably sobered, was hunched up in his revolving desk chair. He rose, glowering, at sight of them. The girl unconsciously shrank back, away from the lash of his glance.

Jayde, turning back to where she faltered behind him, took her hand and drew her forward. His long fingers felt strong and cool.

" So you found the real thief!" he said to her father. " Seems to me I've seen him before. His name is Gilday. Out West, where we have hired him occasionally, he is known as Ricky Gilday."

" It's nothin' to you who he is. You're a liar, just the same! Said you was a buyer, and any fool would know you ain't!"

"As a matter of fact I have been buying direct shipments of coal from independent breakers, for a friend, on my way East; but I didn't come to the Devil's Own for that purpose. The errand that brought me here wasn't of the sort I could blurt out the minute I came into the place, so I posed as a buyer to gain admittance. Of course, I was a fool to do it."

"I knew she lied, too — lied to cover you! By God, I'll—"

"You'll keep still!" Jayde's command shouldered the threat aside. "I was a fool to do it," he resumed, "knowing, as I did, what happened to another man who lied about his business here, about a year ago."

Instantly the room grew strangely hushed. In the stillness, Melissa Shelden, able to see safely past Jayde's danger at last, confronted her own.

"They'll try to kill me now," she told herself. "They'll know that I've told!"

"That other man was a Westerner, too," Jayde's voice was going smoothly on. "He started East on business. Planned to drop off here on his way, and see if he could spot a fellow who had stolen some money from him. He had reason to believe that the thief was working here at the Devil's Own. If he could look over your requisitions, he would know if the fellow's handwriting was on any of them. If he found it, he could go ahead and send the police up here. Well, it happened to be Saturday. If he rode on to Coal City for a permit to look through your papers, he would be too late to get up here the same day. He hated to lose that week-end, so he took a chance on coming straight here and playing off as an inspector, to get a chance to look your requisitions over. Really, he was all right; but he did the right thing wrong. That man—he never went away from here, did he?"

No one answered him.

"I knew him," Jayde went on. "I knew him well. He wasn't a thief, any more than I am to-day. Considering the gang of cutthroats you have here, why should you look for a stranger to accuse when your money disappears? The crook for whom that Westerner was looking happened to be the man you've caught stealing your cash to-day—this same Ricky Gilday. He was here then, too. Probably he robbed you that time. He's a notorious thief!"

Jayde turned directly toward the lowering foreman.

"Maybe, Shelden, you're thinking that dead men tell no tales. Well, if you're planning the same dose for me that you gave him, you don't get away with it. I was wise enough to tip off the State police that I was coming here. If I don't show up by six o'clock to-night, their riders will come here to look for me. If they don't get me, they'll get *you!*"

The black mass of human beings crushed in and about the little office remained utterly quiet. Melissa Shelden, shrinking behind Jayde, with her hand still imprisoned in the firm comfort of his, waited, scarce daring to breathe. She could feel the living hatred that circled them both like fire —hatred held in leash by fear.

She heard her father's voice.

"Well, since you're so glib at explainin' your friend's business, why don't you start explainin' yer own?"

"I will." Jayde's voice, cool and smooth, took up its story. "I came to rob the Devil's Own"—at that admission the silence became a murmur, almost a snarl— "of what it never had any right to possess! I came," he finished quietly, "to take your daughter. I've wanted her ever since I came to know her, a year ago. You see, that other stranger was—is—myself. You killed me — or thought you did. I dropped at the first shot, but I dropped of my own accord. When you sent a couple of scamps to finish the job and cover the evidence, I bribed them to hold their tongues. I got away. I was thinner then, just out of a sick bed. My face was so bony that I wore a beard to cover it up; but I'm the same man."

VII

EVEN in her amazement, the girl listening could not fail to sense the relief that trickled through the Devil's Own. That secret had lain heavily for the last twelve months. She knew the removal of the burden would give room for her father's temper to relax. It was the long strain that had made his ill nature chronic.

"So you sneaked off and planned to come back and get my daughter! Well, you don't—"

"Yes, I do!"

"In the first place, she don't want—"

"Yes, she does. I meant a lot to her then—she has told me so—and I mean just as much to her now. Can't you see for yourself what she tried to do for me to-day? She isn't going to stay in this place another hour. She'll marry me to-night, in Coal City. We'll be in New York a day or two while I attend to some business. Then we'll go West—to my mine and my cabin. I'll leave you the address before I leave; and if ever you care enough about her to look her up, you're welcome to come!"

He forced a slow way through the sullen pack—a way for them both. So at last they stood alone together in the shadow of the foreman's dilapidated hut.

"Please pack what things you want to take as quickly as possible," he urged. "I think we ought to get clear of this place before—before they start using that pay."

She knew that he was right; and yet it was all so incredible that she paused in her going to study him for a second, to assure herself that he was real. Her eyes traced the lines in his lean, strong face.

"I'm sorry that I had to do it in this way," he regretted earnestly. "It's so cruelly abrupt, and I had planned to be so kind! I meant to stay until you knew me and felt no strangeness with me. Who would ever expect that confounded robbery to repeat itself? You see how it forced me to play my hand on the spot."

"It is all right this way," she accepted softly. "I'm only thankful that you held a good hand to lay down. It takes a good one, you know, to beat the Devil's Own!"

The Magnificent Boob

A STORY OF SAVING AND SQUANDERING

By Robert J Horton

SPRING was breathing in the side streets of Manhattan. It had been on Broadway and the avenues for several days, but now it was creeping into every sequestered nook and corner of the city, bringing its balmy message of greening fields and budding lilacs. The cliff dwellers began to think of window boxes and awnings. Policemen in the parks swung their sticks jauntily as they viewed the steadily increasing perambulator parade. New York preened herself under a cloudless sky.

Thus the warm twilight of a perfect day in late May filtered into the West Forties, and found Bertie Grant standing before the mirror in his hall room in Mrs. Smiley's boarding house "for business people only."

Mrs. Smiley had definitely closed her doors to those of the theatrical profession who could not afford more luxuriant quarters than were provided at her modest charges. She preferred work to art and stability to temperament; and she collected her rent in advance.

Bertram Grant possessed all the qualities that Mrs. Smiley admired. He worked in the office of an importing concern at a salary which was neither impressive nor insignificant, and which certainly was regular. He was a "home boy," who preferred quiet reading and thinking, of an evening, to the glitter and jazz of the gilded dance halls. As a result, Bertram Grant had money in the bank. In fact, he had money in two banks.

In the mind of a Gotham landlady, no saint ever deserved a halo more than the boarder who pays regularly, in advance, by check.

Bertie—as they called him in the office, to his disgust—had come to the big city from the country, after graduating from high school. He had been nineteen then, a sallow and credulous youth. Now he was half past twenty-three, city wise, and a bit sophisticated. He was as neat with his attire as he was with his pen. He was healthy and good-looking, with that dreamy look the women fall for; but of women he thought nothing, until—

We mustn't get ahead of our story.

And it mustn't be said of Bertram Grant that he didn't *think* of women; for he had become mentally married to a dream girl when he was twenty.

That's how it started, and that's how he came to have money in two banks and a reputation for steadiness as unassailable as that of the well known rock used in the advertisements.

Bertie came of practical stock, which believed in anticipating the bridge as well as in crossing it safely when it was reached. So, when the city had mocked him with its loneliness for a year, he seriously considered the possibility of marriage. Most men marry—in their minds, at least—when they are about that age. His salary was raised at the time until it corresponded exactly in dollars with the number of his years.

He began to save.

First he saved for the wedding trip, and at the end of six months he had enough laid away for the three-day period of supreme bliss in Atlantic City. Then he recollected the engagement ring, and in five months more he had sufficient to meet that outlay. Then he began furnishing the flat.

It was in this way that he came to have two bank accounts. One was his regular account, on which he checked for personal expenses, and the other was his " marriage fund." He kept them in different banks, so that there would be small probability of their becoming mixed.

The marriage fund account, of course, carried by far the larger balance of the two. He did not check on this, and each week he set aside a certain sum for it.

Within a year and a half, he purchased —mentally purchased, that is—the furniture for a small flat. He made a veritable game of it, setting down in an account book the articles he bought and the prices he paid for them. He bought pretty good stuff, too. The dining room was done in mahogany; the bedroom set was in bird's-eye maple.

" That 'll get us the parlor lamp we want," he observed when Mr. Lacey, the cashier and his boss, notified him of a raise to twenty-two fifty a week.

Mr. Lacey smiled agreeably. Fine thing! Excellent example! Young married man living happily on twenty dollars a week or so, and contented and efficient so far as his work was concerned. You see, Bertie had made a slip now and then about " our home," and what he was going to " buy " next, and naturally Mr. Lacey got the impression that he was married.

And so Bertie was—in his mind. He frequently sat in the darkened shadows of his hall room—he could have afforded better accommodations had it not been for the marriage fund—and thought of his dream home and his child wife. He always thought of her as his child wife, although she hadn't materialized beyond the imaginary stage. Bertie was too deeply interested in his game to take much notice of the goings and comings of the world at large. It might have been peopled with replicas of his dream bride, and he wouldn't have seen one of them!

II

When Bertie Grant was twenty-three, and was raised to twenty-five a week, he added a phonograph, and the home was complete.

He had now been mentally married for nearly three years, and his imaginary home life was very comfortable. Oh, don't laugh! New York is full of these dreamers, and not all of them are young.

He suffered one disappointment at this time. A young painter who had slipped into Mrs. Smiley's unawares had promised to paint Bertie a scene, " Central Park by Moonlight," which he was going to hang in the dining room; but Mrs. Smiley learned the horrible truth about the artist before the picture was painted. The offender had to move to Greenwich Village, where he lost what he termed his " pastoral atmosphere."

In three weeks, however, Bertie had saved enough for a creditable picture to cover the imaginary spot over the imaginary mantel in the imaginary flat.

Then rents went up—which caused him a great deal of anxiety. His " wife " had to have a lot of clothes he had not reckoned on. Mrs. Smiley, not wishing to lose such a steady and solvent boarder, answered tactful questions which he put by saying that instead of two being able to live almost as cheaply as one, two couldn't begin to live on what one could make. There were other things to be considered, also.

It was then that their first child was born.

Of course, this was only a mental child, but it presented a problem which became more and more complicated and involved. Such a web of ramifications tangled up Bertie's accounts that even his vivid imagination couldn't unravel them. He became listless, and the game lost much of its lure.

His home seemed less attractive, although at times he liked it better than ever—well, you know how men are with a baby around the house.

He began to yawn, and to go to bed earlier.

Mrs. Smiley, who had accidentally found his account book and made note of the entries therein, began to find regular weekly figures set opposite " Expenses," for want of a more suitable designation.

So when spring came to the city, and crept into Bertie's room, it found him standing before the mirror contemplating the fact that his trials as a family man hadn't perceptibly aged him. He was young and strong, he was healthy, and he had eleven hundred and eighty-five dollars in the bank.

What was that saying? The first thousand is the hardest to get—or the hardest to keep?

Well, he'd got the money, and he had kept it; and spring had come.

But he shook off the lure of the city in its new dress and mood. He had attained to man's estate, and he would go on and lay up a fortune.

He could do it. He had the foundation. He must look around for a profitable investment. Money breeds money. He had a nest egg, and he must put it to hatch. Some day — well, hadn't most of New York's great financiers come from the country?

Also he must eat less meat and more green stuff. That was a good rule in warm weather. Oh, he was sensible, he told himself! Lacey at fifty was no more conservative than he, Bertie, at twenty-three and a half.

Then he met Hazel West in the dairy lunch across the street from where he worked.

III

It would have been impossible for Bertie to avoid meeting Hazel West that Monday noon. She was the new cashier, working her first shift. Even if he hadn't chosen to look up when he pushed his check and a fifty-cent piece across the glass counter, he still would have had to listen to her bantering, musical voice; for Hazel was nervous, and made a mistake in the amount of his change.

" Oh, excuse me! Your check is twenty-seven, instead of thirty-seven. You have another dime coming."

That was what Bertie heard. It was the tone of the girl's voice that prompted him to look up hastily and emit a feeble gasp as he fumbled with the two dimes and the three pennies she handed out to him.

Afterward, as he slowly wended his way back to the office, he remembered three things distinctly.

He remembered her hair. He never had seen such hair. It was red, and yet it wasn't red. It was *nearly* red—an auburn of a deeper and richer tint than burnished gold; and it was bobbed in a most becoming fashion.

He remembered her eyes. Laughing eyes, they were—brown, he believed, with a sort of a greenish tinge to them—oh, he couldn't describe the color! They had sparkled at him in a most disturbing way. He just missed being run over by a truck thinking of them.

On the way up in the elevator he thought of her lips. They had smiled at him, disclosing a row of pearls between their ruby curves. He wondered vaguely if she used a—what was it? He had gone rusty on material matters concerning women. Oh, yes—a lip stick!

As he took off his coat to don his office jacket, he found himself frowning down the thought that the new cashier at his noonday eating house should find it necessary to use a lip stick. Hers was natural color, he felt sure.

But why should he bother himself about her?

He shrugged, and went about his work. Lacey smiled at him, as his chief often did. A capable man, that young Grant, as young married men should be. Conscientious, too. It was time to give him another moderate raise.

Despite his scornful attitude toward himself for thinking about the new cashier across the street, Bertie Grant actually discovered, next morning, that he was looking forward to lunch with something akin to keen anticipation. Moreover, the night before, his attention had continually strayed from the financial columns of his paper to inconsequential things, such as the window curtains, the ridiculous pictures on his walls, the few books on his table—at all of which he gazed without seeing them, a prey to vain and foolish thoughts. It was extremely disconcerting, and not at all in accord with his well ordered life.

He hurried across to the restaurant a full five minutes ahead of his usual time.

He sat at a table where he could steal furtive glances at the new cashier.

Slowly he became conscious of a certain vague feeling of familiarity about her. Had he seen her before? Positively not! Could he have met her somewhere and immediately forgotten her? He was just as sure this could not be. He could never forget a girl like that!

Nevertheless, he had a disturbing sense that he recognized something about her—some intangible charm that was hers, and that appealed to him in particular.

He resented the harmless gibes the masculine patrons directed at her when they paid their checks. Some of them leered at her, in his opinion, and he felt like getting up and punching their noses.

He consumed the limit of his time for lunch in secretly observing her; but he refrained from looking directly at her as he paid his score, though he thrilled for some unaccountable reason when he heard her murmured—

" Thank you!"

That night he ignored the financial columns, which he had been scanning in his search for a suitable investment for his savings. Instead, he went over to Riverside Drive, and sat staring at the reflection of the New Jersey lights in the smooth water of the Hudson.

Next day Lacey went to lunch with him across the street, and noticed, with some concern, that his protégé was taciturn and inclined to be irritable. Lacey had selected a table from which Bertie could get hardly a glimpse of the new cashier, despite his neck twistings and chair hitchings. Some of his replies to Lacey's conversation were a bit short and to the point.

This made Lacey thoughtful. Perhaps Grant was becoming dissatisfied with his position, or with his salary.

Upon returning to the office, Lacey immediately entered Bertie for a raise to thirty dollars a week.

IV

THE great truth dawned upon Bertie that night.

Clad in his pyjamas, sitting on the edge of his bed in the darkened shadows of his hall room, he suddenly recognized the new cashier. He knew her for the one woman in all the world for whom he had been waiting. That auburn hair—those laughing eyes—her lips! No wonder she had started him thinking. She was his dream girl—his child wife!

Thereupon Bertie Grant lay back and fell asleep with spring in his heart.

Joyfully he went to work next day, joyfully he reveled in his anticipation of the lunch hour, joyfully he watched her as he ate. When he paid his check, she smiled at him as he mentioned that spring had arrived.

That smile fanned all his dormant affections into a burning flame. Bertie was hooked. He was head over heels in love, and glad of it.

It was then that he noticed that his clothes had gone a bit to seed. He hadn't been paying proper attention to his attire. He asked Lacey for an extra half hour or so at lunch time, next day, " to get some new togs," and his chief promptly acquiesced. He bought two new suits and some shoes and haberdashery, drawing a check upon his personal account which pretty well wiped out its balance. He should worry, with almost twelve hundred dollars in the marriage fund!

Every noon he spoke to the girl, and she answered and smiled. Why not? Bertie was well set up and good-looking, and he wasn't fresh.

The next Monday, after a hard thinking session over Sunday, Bertie got up sufficient courage to make a distinct advance.

" I was—er—wondering," he stammered, growing a trifle red in the face, " if you—that is, you see—I don't know many girls in the city—"

" Speak right up, Cholly!" she bantered, putting a white, shapely hand to her wonderful auburn locks. " You want me to go joy riding with you in your car?"

" Next Sunday—if you'd be so kind," he heard himself saying, as his heart thumped in a spasm of ecstasy. " My name's Bertram Grant, and I work across the street."

" You really got a car?" she asked in delighted surprise.

" Why, certainly," he replied. " That is, I'm buying one this week. I was—er—waiting for spring."

" I'd be delighted to go, I believe," she murmured. " It's nice to get out of the hot city. I adore the country!"

" Sunday, then—I'll see you to-morrow,"

said Bertie, as he gave way to another patron.

He entered the office smiling with pent emotion, and went about his tasks with singing spirits; but as the afternoon wore on, he became sober. Was it the thought of the joy ride which had prompted her to accept his invitation? He frowned. Well, he would have to buy a car. It was probably just as well. They could, for a time, economize on other things. And if a car would help him to win that girl, well—she was worth it!

Two evenings afterward he became the owner of a small touring car upon a first payment, license and insurance included, of three hundred and three dollars. He drew a check on the marriage fund.

Mrs. Smiley heartily disapproved of the expenditure, but she hesitated to state her opinion in the face of Bertie's new and masterful manner. Then, too, it gave her house a certain dignity which it had lacked, she reflected. No other boarder had a car.

Bertie learned from the girl herself that her name was Hazel West. On Sunday morning they sped up the Hudson.

" I don't want to go over twenty or twenty-five miles an hour while I'm breaking it in," he apologized.

" This is wonderful!" she cooed, snuggling in the seat beside him. " I adore the country!"

Bertie accidentally stepped her up to thirty miles as the thrills swept up and down his spine, and down to the toes against the foot throttle.

" We'll have lots of good times," he said brokenly. " We'll stop at some quiet inn for dinner."

" Ain't you grand?" she murmured, and again the speedometer jumped.

At noon they drove in to one of those sequestered road houses along the northern highway, where Bertie filled the car with gas and oil, and Hazel and himself with a chicken dinner at two dollars a plate.

They drove back in the cool of the late afternoon and early evening.

" We ought to drive out to some place some evening this week," Bertie suggested, sounding his horn authoritatively to give emphasis to his words.

" To a dance?" she suggested in delicious tones.

" Exactly!" agreed Bertie, trying to conceal his nervousness. " Say Friday night?"

" That would be fine!" exclaimed Hazel, letting her hand rest for a moment upon his right arm.

As Bertie drove her home, he was wondering if the right amount of cash in the right place would yield him the needed knowledge of up-to-date dancing in four nights of lessons.

During his mental married life, Bertie had become a trifle rusty.

V

" WHY, sure!" said the master of the dancing academy, the next night. " You say you've danced two-steps and waltzes the old-fashioned way? Leave it to me. For — for " — he hesitated, looking Bertie over—" for forty dollars I'll turn you out a finished dancer by Friday night, if I have to put every woman instructor I've got on the job!"

So Bertie drew a check on the marriage fund for forty dollars. They could do without that expensive rug, he decided. He had allowed too much for that rug, anyhow.

The dancing master was true to his word. Of course, it must be admitted that Bertie had a measure of native terpsichorean talent. He was light upon his feet, and his slender, muscular build lent itself to the rhythm of the dance quite naturally. Moreover, his teachers liked him—which had a lot to do with it.

When he drove Hazel through the evening twilight to the dancing pavilion up the river, he had no fear of disappointing her. Nor did he. She told him, with a languishing look in her wonderful eyes—yes, there was a little green in them—that she adored his dancing.

He had drawn fifty dollars from the marriage fund—the amount that he had set aside for her illness that first year—to be sure of having sufficient money in event of some unforeseen emergency. That first smile alone was worth the fifty. Anyhow, she looked healthy.

They became acquainted with other dancers, and Bertie more than once felt the excruciating pangs of jealousy as she floated by in the arms of perfect strangers—strangers save by courtesy of the floor manager. He felt a certain proprietorship in Hazel, for wasn't she his dream bride?

They sat out a dance, under the lanterns strung among the trees.

" You know — er — I've been saving money for some time to get married on," he said suddenly, looking out over the placid surface of the river, where the reflection of distant lights showed here and there like colored spangles.

"Indeed!" she said, looking at him. "How interesting!"

Bertie frowned. She noted that he looked rather nice when he frowned. Though he seldom smoked, he lit a cigarette, with some agitation.

"Yes—I've been thinking that the time was coming when I'd want to get married," he went on in a rather shaky voice.

"Why, that's the same thing Jimmy Lang was telling me last week" she remarked wonderingly.

Bertie scowled.

"Jimmy got a car?" he asked casually.

"No, but he's awfully nice," said Hazel, in a low voice.

Bertie felt strangely irritated.

"What say we run down to the road house below here and get a bite of supper?" he suggested.

"Isn't that place a bit—just a little expensive?" asked Hazel cautiously.

"Hang the expense!" Bertie blurted. "Nothing's too good for you!"

"All the same, I wouldn't want you to spend your money foolishly," said the girl wistfully.

"Come on with me, girly," he ordered. "I'm running this party!"

The supper did prove expensive; but as Hazel leaned over the table toward him, with the little shaded lamp shedding a glow upon her lustrous hair and lighting her face, he felt well repaid. He had been missing a lot in the last two or three years, he told himself.

On the way back he found he had progressed so far in the matter of operating the car that he could steer with one hand—his left; nor did Hazel object to his disposition of his right arm. During that blissful hour he forgot about the payment on the car—some fifty dollars—which would be due in about two weeks; forgot about the extra expense of several dollars a month for garage rent; forgot about the cost of gas and oil; forgot everything except the road in front of him and the girl beside him.

Next noon he gave Hazel a two-dollar box of chocolates. She knew what it had cost, and she looked at him with a peculiar look in her eyes as he went out of the restaurant. She watched him clear across the street, while a dyspeptic customer waited for his change and muttered savagely.

In another week they were walking to the subway together after work; for they discovered that they had the same hours. Sometimes Bertie rode on to her station and then walked home with her.

On one of these occasions Hazel paused before a furniture shop, and admired a lamp and a rug displayed in the windows. Bertie bought them both next day—the lamp at forty-two dollars and fifty cents, and the rug at thirty-six. He had them sent to his room, giving a check for seventy-eight dollars and fifty cents on the marriage fund. He had intended to buy a lamp and rug anyway, he reasoned, and if she liked those, why — and wasn't he now getting thirty dollars a week salary?

He met the payment on the car.

Another month rolled away almost before he knew it. It was filled with delightful excursions about the countryside, with dinners at enchanting inns, where Hazel ordered from expensive menus with as much care as possible, while Bertie beamed upon her.

Another payment on their magic means of transportation, and Bertie's vacation period arrived.

"I'll meet you every night and take you home, or we'll drive out somewhere for dinner and a dance," he told her on the eve of his period of freedom from office ties.

"But won't it be — won't it cost you quite a bit?" she asked.

"No more than it would for me to go away on a vacation, and it 'll be lots more fun," he replied gallantly.

The beaches saw much of them during those two weeks. Bertie checked into his marriage fund account to the extent of a hundred and twenty-five dollars; but it didn't bother him. Hazel's eyes were shining for him alone, he felt sure. He was making up for all the pleasure he now realized he had missed during the years of his mental wedded existence.

Several times he was on the point of telling Hazel the hope that was in his heart; but each time words failed him, and she laughed him back to his senses.

His vacation over, another payment made on the little car, and Hazel got a Saturday afternoon off.

"We'll go to Asbury Park," Bertie announced. "We'll take your sister and maybe some other girl along for chaperons."

She consented, and Bertie resolved that on this trip he would learn his fate; but the blind goddess who held his destiny was even then reaching for certain strings.

VI

In taking Hazel's sister and a friend of hers, Bertie found, too late, that he had frustrated his own design. The sister and the friend refused to be separated from Hazel and himself. That night and all Sunday, until it became time to start for home, he was in the rôle of entertainer of the trio of girls; and as he paid all expenses, quite naturally, he made a further inroad of nearly fifty dollars into the precious marriage fund.

Bertie was vexed. On the way back he thought of the expense he had been put to during the summer, and this time he forgot how much pleasure he had had. He thought more and more, and, as his thoughts grew more and more gloomy, he stepped on the gas harder and harder. He forgot the speed laws, too, until he heard the ominous roar of a motor cycle behind him as he raced into a suburban town near the Hudson.

A car swung down from a cross street. Bertie jammed on his brakes and swerved to the left in an effort to avoid it. The three girls screamed. Then Bertie crashed into the other car amidships, shoving it halfway across the street before he could stop.

The motor cycle officer dismounted with a grim smile; but Bertie didn't see him. He was staring wide-eyed at the driver of the car he had struck. It was Lacey—and he was glaring balefully at Bertie and Hazel in the front seat.

"Why, Mr. Lacey!" Bertie rather foolishly exclaimed.

The officer was taking out his book. Lacey was getting out of his shattered car.

"It's lucky I didn't have my wife and family with me," he shot at Bertie.

Bertie could only sit and stare. Here was a genuine catastrophe. He needed no second glance to see that a good deal of damage had been done to Lacey's car.

"I'll—I'll pay for it," he stammered.

"I know that!" snapped Lacey. "That was a foregone conclusion from the minute I saw you coming down the street at sixty miles an hour!"

"About forty-five would be right," said the officer cheerfully.

"I didn't realize I was going so fast," Bertie blurted.

"That's what they all say," observed the officer.

"Oh, you wouldn't take him to jail, would you, officer?" asked Hazel. "I've ridden with him lots, and this is the first time he's speeded like that."

"Once is enough!" replied the officer.

Something in Hazel's anxious way of putting the question, and in the tone of her voice, cheered Bertie and gave him strength in the crisis. He hopped out of the car as Lacey came around on his side.

"This is Miss West. I expect you've seen her in the restaurant across the street," he introduced.

"Oh, yes, I've seen her!" said Lacey, in a sarcastic tone.

In that moment Bertie hated his chief; but he introduced Hazel's sister and her friend. Lacey's brows arched.

"Been to Asbury Park for the week-end," Bertie explained, noting that both of his front fenders were bent down over the tires, both lamps smashed, and other damage done.

Lacey's brows arched still more, and he looked at Bertie coldly.

"I see! I see!"

"Meanwhile, we better get a garage man to cart away the remains," said Bertie, nettled at Lacey's manner. "Get out, girls. I'll see that you get home all right, if I have to hire a dozen cars!"

"An' you can start talkin' to *me*, now," said the officer, in a gruff voice.

Wednesday morning came with Lacey still maintaining a decidedly cold and distant attitude.

Bertie's own composure was considerably ruffled. He was irritable. Even Hazel noted a change in his treatment of her. He looked at her, she thought, a bit wistfully, but with a disconcerting air of resignation. He hadn't gone home with her from work that week.

Bertie had paid his fine over in Jersey. He had paid the twenty-six-dollar cost of repairing his own car. When he took it home, he told the garage man that he probably would never call for it again.

That Wednesday night the final blow fell. At the close of the day's work, Lacey called Bertie into his cage and presented a bill for fifty-eight dollars and seventy cents.

Bertie winced, but drew his check on the marriage fund without a word. His chief folded the slip of paper and carefully stowed it away.

As Bertie was turning to go, Lacey cleared his throat.

"Ah—Grant!" he called.

Bertie swung about, frowning.

"Ah—under the circumstances, and for—ah—reasons which I consider sufficient, I believe it will be just as well if you hand in your resignation, to take effect this Saturday," said Lacey, coolly.

Bertie gasped and gulped and stared at his chief.

"You—mean—you want me to go?" he stammered, incredulous.

"As I said, I believe it will be just as well," said Lacey.

Bertie's jaw dropped.

Lacey turned methodically to where his coat and hat hung, put them on, looked at Bertie inquiringly, and, as Bertie passed out, locked the cage door and walked rapidly to the elevator.

Bertie caught the car on its return trip. As he reached the street, he saw Hazel emerging from the restaurant. She waved to him, and he joined her.

On the way home he broke the news to her. Her sympathetic replies stirred him. Suddenly he became angry. As they neared his station, he smote his knee viciously.

"When lunch time comes to-morrow, I'm going to go in and tell Lacey what I think of him," he declared; "and then I'm going to bust him one right on the nose! That 'll be my resignation!"

"Oh, Bertie!"

But he was making for the door, and a moment later he was gone.

Tears welled in Hazel's eyes. She knew by Bertie's manner that he had meant just what he had said.

VII

Whatever it was that had caused Bertie's ire to rise had not diminished next day. He greeted his associates with curt nods when he came to work, and ignored Lacey entirely. On the minute of twelve he entered the cage that served as his chief's private office.

"Mr. Lacey, I'm going to give you my resignation in a minute," he said grimly.

Lacey looked at him questioningly, struck by the fire in his eyes.

"First I want to say that I think you're pretty small to get so sore about that accident over there in that trick suburb where you live," Bertie went on stoutly. "I had my own reasons for going fast that day, just as you say you've got your own reasons for wanting me to leave here. You might be decent enough to realize that I wouldn't run into your car on purpose!"

"Now, listen here, young man," Lacey began. "I—"

"And you might give me credit for paying for the damage, which I did without a squeal, even if the garage people stuck you, as I believe!"

"Just a minute, Grant—"

But again Lacey's speech was interrupted. A girl came running into the cage, while those in the office stopped work and stared in astonishment.

"Bertie, you haven't—oh, I'm glad I'm in time!" cried Hazel, with a catch in her voice.

It was Bertie's turn to stare open-mouthed.

"What—what are you doing here?" he managed to ask.

"Well, now that she's here, I'll explain things to you, Grant," said Lacey sternly. "I have no sympathy for a married man who runs around the country with unmarried women."

"Married man—married—man?" said Bertie vaguely.

"Yes—aren't you married?" Lacey demanded. "I've heard you mention your home and your wife around here for more than two years—"

Suddenly Bertie began to laugh—a hollow, broken laugh.

"You thought I was married, and was joy riding Miss West and leaving my—my—wife at home?" he asked.

"Exactly. Isn't it the truth?" Lacey frowned deeply. "I don't care particularly about the accident, and you made the damage right, as you say; but I do care about the morals of my employees, Grant."

Bertie smiled bitterly. Then, in a dull, listless voice he explained the marriage fund plan, whereby he had accumulated his savings.

Hazel West slipped out during the recital. Bertie followed her wistfully with his eyes.

Lacey stared and muttered and toyed with the pens on his desk. From time to time he looked at Bertie with a pitying expression, which changed to wonder. Sometimes he had to compress his lips tightly, and again he blew his nose, while his eyes looked suspiciously cheerful.

"Run along and get your lunch, and never mind about the—the resignation," he said, scowling heavily, when Bertie finished. "Spruce up on your work again. You've a good future here—"

It was all he could say. He blew his nose vigorously, looking after Bertram Grant as that young gentleman, seemingly with the weight of untold years on his shoulders, dragged himself to the elevator.

VIII

It was evening on Riverside Drive. The first cool breeze of autumn was stirring the varicolored leaves, whispering its message of impending winter. The reflection of the lights sparkled coldly in the dark depths of the river. A steamer churned its way upstream, leaving a silver ribbon of seething water in its wake.

Bertie and Hazel were sitting on a bench below the street.

Hazel was strangely silent this night, but Bertie was talking—talking with a wild abandon which was not his wont.

"And that's how I saved almost twelve hundred dollars," he said soberly. "Then I blew it like a drunken sailor, trying to get the girl I found out I'd saved it for," he went on bitterly. "That car stands me quite a bit!"

"Oh, I knew it was costing lots of money," replied Hazel softly.

"Well, we had some good parties, even if they *were* expensive," Bertie reflected.

"But we could have had just as good in—in cheaper places," Hazel observed.

"Do you remember that standing lamp with the hand-painted shade you liked so well, one night, when we were looking in the furniture store windows up near your place?"

"The one that looked like a genuine parchment shade?" she asked.

"I bought it," said Bertie, with a harsh laugh.

"You *bought* it?"

"And the rug, too—the rug that was in the same window."

"*Bertie!*" she exclaimed.

"I've got 'em in my room. They make good ornaments."

"But—*Bertie!*"

"Remember how you said you adored the country?" he went on. "I bought a lot up there in that Hudson suburb place you said you liked, and I've made the payments to date."

"*Bertie!*" she cried again, sitting back to look at him as he stared moodily into the water.

"And now I've got exactly a hundred and forty-two dollars and twenty-seven cents left in the bank," he concluded, almost cheerfully.

The girl didn't answer. Her lips were trembling.

"Of course, I can get something out of the car, and I suppose I can sell the lamp and the rug, and Lacey says he's going to raise my salary again the first of the year; but, confound it, I don't care anything about the money. What knocks me cold is losing you!"

"Losing *me,* Bertie?" she asked in a low, trembling voice.

"Yes—losing *you,*" he repeated bitterly. "I haven't anything to offer you now but a man with a salary and a lot of payments to keep up."

"But I—I helped you to spend the money, didn't I?" she asked softly.

"You did not!" he retorted, looking at her sternly. "I ain't blaming you a bit. *I'm* the poor simp. But, gee, Hazel, I—I sure like you!"

She burst out laughing. He looked at her with an icy chill gripping his heart. She was making fun of him! It had all been so much sport for her, after all!

Then, suddenly, she threw her arms about his neck, and her laughter changed to tears.

"Oh, you magnificent boob!" she sobbed on his shoulder.

He stiffened as her fingers began to ruffle his hair.

"Hazel," he said uncertainly, "you don't mean—you surely don't mean—"

She raised her face, damp with tears, and looked up at him with shining eyes.

Then Bertie remembered that he, too, had a pair of arms. He held her close while their lips met.

"We'll keep the lot and let the car go, deary," she cooed in his ear. "We can use the lamp and the rug in our flat, even if it *is* furnished."

The policeman, who had been watching idly from the street above, moved slowly away, twirling his night stick and whistling merrily.

Such is the magic of youth, and starlight, and dancing waters.

The Masculine Mind

A STUDENT OF SEX PSYCHOLOGY FINDS THAT SOME OF HIS CONCLUSIONS ARE NOT ENTIRELY CORRECT

By Elizabeth Irons Folsom

"YOU have the masculine mind, Miss White," remarked Max Gard.

Janet White put a weight on her papers before she looked up.

"Masculine?"

There was a strip of mirror let into the wall. She looked at her reflection—not a glance, but a straight look, that Gard might see if he chose. As if reënforced, she said again:

"Masculine, Mr. Gard? Surely I am not masculine?"

"I do not mean in your appearance. I mean in your mind."

She smiled faintly.

"Do you know what is in my mind?"

"Could you be in my office six months, and I not know? I wonder if you recognize the masculine attributes, Miss White. Do you distinguish them from the feminine ones?"

"Really, I don't know."

She said it indifferently. She took the weight off her papers and changed their arrangement, apparently according to some careful scheme.

He went on with relish.

"No—not at all in your appearance. In appearance you are—er—according to feminine standard. Your eyes are very nice. There are several shades of blue in them. They are a little too long, but, as they are set rather far apart, they create an—er—appeal. Your hair, Miss White, is worn in so simple a way that it is distinguished. I have often observed that. Your figure is good. I do not mean at all that you are masculine in your appearance or in your manner; but your mind—I hark back again to your mind—is strong in its masculinity."

An outer door slammed. The last of the stenographers were leaving. Miss White turned the key in a drawer and pushed back her chair a scant half inch.

Mr. Gard did not notice. His work for the day was over, and he had stopped halfway to the cloak room to put into words what he had often thought of his efficient secretary. He was tall, slender, self-assured, and extremely courteous in a hurried, nearsighted way. He looked like the keen criminal lawyer that he was.

The keenness had been at work upon him. It had grayed his hair a little and cut lines down from the corners of his mouth, but it had not disturbed his eagerness, nor his ability to smile quickly and, with that quick smile, to turn over to his listener a warm comradeship, a something that made slight acquaintance close, if Gard willed it so. He did not always will it.

He was arranging himself comfortably, part on and part off a balanced chair.

"I wonder how much you know of the feminine characteristics," he continued. "I have been much interested in the psychology of the sexes. I will lend you some books, if you like, and will indicate to you how to study them. As a result of my reading, I can put my idea very simply. The feminine qualities, shorn of all but a simple one-word meaning, are good taste, vanity, curiosity, and sociability. The masculine qualities, also thus shorn, are good taste, justice, sense, and control."

"Control!" murmured Miss White.

"Control of—er—appetites," explained Mr. Gard. "Do you see how I apply these simplified attributes to you?"

"No, I don't."

"In the first place, you have none of the distinctive feminine traits. You have no vanity—you do not correct your garments constantly, or do any of the things to your complexion that I see done everywhere. Your shoes"—he looked down at them—"delayed my final decision, as they appeared in some degree coquettish, but you do not seem conscious of them, or show any effort to make them prominent. You do not pose when visitors come in. You have no curiosity. I have never seen you listen when you were not expected to—"

"Well, really!"

The girl's interruption was indignant.

"Nor have you touched a paper not intended for you, or looked up at clients coming or going, or shown any of the hundred curiosities that a woman in your position usually displays. You are not sociable. You do not chatter at the lunch hour. You are not pleased at this moment, Miss White, that I am talking to you."

He waited for a denial, but it did not come. A faint smile was checked before he had gauged its quality.

"You are the embodiment of good taste in all that you say," he went on, "as well as in your dress and manner; but that is also a masculine attribute, and does not disturb my reckoning. No, you are not feminine. I have watched you carefully. I have listened to you as you talked to others. I have heard you speaking in another room, on matters not concerning me, and I have listened, because I have been studying you."

She put the fingers of one hand controllingly to her lips and puckered them together, thus killing a smile in the making.

He sat down upon his balanced chair.

"Don't get the idea that the usual woman has, when she finds that a man watches her. I do not like you, Miss White—that is, I do not like you as a woman. You do not attract me. I could never get a thrill from your presence. I study you because I have never known a young woman so like a man."

He had her full attention. The shaded blue eyes of which he had spoken were not diminished in size by lowered lids. Her straight eyebrows were curved for the minute. Her mouth was not exactly open, but certainly it was not tightly closed.

Mr. Gard felt that he was being understood, and that he was having a very good time. This girl was intelligent, and it was a distinct pleasure to enlighten her.

"Yes, I have studied you, and I have made a chart of your character. Would you be interested to see it?"

"Very much indeed," said Miss White.

He rose and swung briskly back to his own room, whistling as he went. When he returned and drew his chair closer, his professional manner was all there. He might have been ready to offer some clinching evidence to opposing counsel.

He presented a square piece of paper marked "J. W." In the center of it was a sort of spider web, from which lines radiated to such words as "loyalty," "generosity," "friendship," and "optimism." Further radiations ended in other words inclosed in circles, and there were some wavering dotted lines which went nowhere.

He explained these last.

"I have not reached decisions on those points," he said. "You see, the final analysis of a character is a matter of long observation, and cannot be reached at once, no matter how earnest the student. For instance, I have as yet really nothing upon which to base a conclusion on your—well, say 'truthfulness,' as indicated here. You don't mind my interest, I hope?"

"I am extremely obliged to you," reassured Miss White.

"I do not want you to think that you are singled out in any unusual way. It is my habit to do this sort of thing."

"I see!"

"But I will say this—that your character is especially interesting to me. You have so much that is vital that you are rather remarkable for your age. Probably you are not much over thirty."

"I am twenty-two," said Miss White, in a slightly raised voice.

"Really? So young? I did not think it." He looked at her sharply. "You are thinking that this character study of mine is a light thing for a man of my profession, are you not? Yes, I thought so. You looked it. It happens to be my fancied pursuit. Call it a fad, if you like—I suppose I can have one. Other men have golf, motoring, the drama, art, literature—my recreation lies in these analyses. To me it is not a fad, but my form of relaxation, to which, surely, I am entitled—"

"I was not thinking of questioning it, Mr. Gard."

He frowned at the interruption.

"In your case, I find a remarkable thing—a combination of strong character and great physical attractiveness; but I find that you are entirely devoid of that quality in which a man's heart interest—if you will pardon the word — centers. Despite your attractive mind and person, I am willing to wager that no man has ever wanted to marry you. I'll go farther, and predict that no man ever will want to marry you, Miss White."

He restored the chair to its legs, stood up, and smiled engagingly.

All the blood not engaged at that moment in supplying the girl's vital needs came into her cheeks, her chin, and her forehead. It surprised Gard, but did not diminish his confidence in his prediction.

"I'd wager heavily on it," he said.

The girl lifted her reddened face.

"You'd lose, Mr. Gard," she said defiantly. "I am married."

Max Gard suddenly lowered his throat into his collar and propelled his head forward, in the traditional motion of startled, peering perplexity.

"Er—married?"

"Yes," she said, her voice rising several tones. "Yes — two years. I — I have a daughter a year old."

"Daughter!" said Mr. Gard. "Married a year! A daughter two years—"

"No, the other way." Miss White relaxed into a nervous laugh. "Yes, I'm married. I'm very sorry to disturb your theories."

Max Gard was stirred. He had been careering so confidently upon his smoothly riding hobby, and was so confident in his own discernment, that he had no easy and ready reply.

"I cannot imagine—" he said vaguely.

She did not say more. He stood still as she locked her desk with a snap. He felt singularly rebuked for no reason at all—singularly at sea all of a sudden.

He glanced at her, and, if he had not known there was no reason for it, he would have thought her angry. Her eyes passed over him slantingly, and their shaded blues were darker and brighter than he had pictured them in his mind. The heels of her possibly objectionable shoes hit the floor sharply, and she pulled down her brown hat with some force.

II

After Miss White had gone, Gard remembered some unfinished work on his desk that might as well be done when the office was quiet.

The papers for an impending trial were stacked invitingly before him. He plunged into them, congratulating himself that he had not gone out as he had intended. There was a wide quietness about him. Doors stood open with no sound of action, no click of typewriter. A silence warming, soothing, relaxing, lay through the long suite of rooms. Life was good, he thought, as he spread out his papers—health, work that held interest, and silence to do it in.

But he did not work very long. The chart of his secretary's character was on the desk. She had made him slightly ridiculous in his own mind. It annoyed him. He addressed the chart:

"I don't believe a word she said! I get the flavor of untruth. I wonder if I said something she did not like, and she wanted to contradict me! Is she feminine? Was her vanity hurt when I said that no one would want to marry her? Does she look upon marriage as the big aim of a girl's life? Well, I stressed it myself, by making it important that no one would want her. That was a queer thing for me to say! Why should I have spoken of her marriage? I could have made my point without it."

He smoothed the character chart.

"I'll try her out on that. I don't believe her. She was not telling the truth. I cannot be so seriously mistaken. I have watched her carefully, and she has not the quality that attracts toward love-making. Of course, it is not important, except as it disturbs my analysis; but I'll try her out!"

During the next few days, however, his energies were devoted to the trial, and he practically forgot about his untruthful secretary. He lost a case which he had greatly desired to win, and the sense of defeat was not light when he came into his office, shortly before the closing hour.

The spring air was heavy. There were rain clouds in the west, and they had sent on smothering heralds. In the outer office, one girl had lilacs in her dress, a second had yellow daisies, a third had more lilacs. In his room, the secretary's broad collar lay unadorned above her brown blouse.

Gard did not speak. A band of sunlight glared across his desk. She reached out a hand and pulled down the shade that shut it off. He liked that.

She did not speak, either. He could hear the rustle of her papers as she turned them. It was not at all an annoying rustle.

He was pondering. Had he lost that case because of some flaw in his argument? He always prided himself upon his unbroken line of thought. He had been sure. Too sure? No, he thought not.

A tiny rustle—a light step. He turned his head.

"Miss White—Mrs. White, I should say —I lost my case to-day."

"I wonder why!"

He smiled instantly. How practical she was! No weak, feminine "Too bad," or "Never mind," but a speculative phrase that might suggest a remedy. The masculine secretary!

"I wonder why, too," he answered, and swung around. "Perhaps I was too sure; or did I work on wrong lines? It makes me doubt myself, when I fail like this."

"Perhaps you had a stupid jury," she suggested, smiling.

She was extremely pretty when she smiled like that. Pity she was not—no, not pity at all! Congratulations, that she could gratify his eyes and still meet him squarely with his own qualities!

"You will take it up on a writ of error, of course?" she suggested.

"Of course," replied Gard.

There was clear, straight business in her look and pose, supplemented by sense—the strong quality that made the man. Her steady hand held the papers with no fumbling. A sun ray laid itself across her head, kindling red lights in her hair. It was fine to look at those lights, to see so much that was lovely about her, and then to be backed up mentally as well as any man of his acquaintance could do it!

"Mrs. White," he said suddenly, "every step of the way, I was wondering if my judgment was wrong. I had thought my argument out very carefully, but I lost. Shall I try a new scheme, or stick to the one I chose in the beginning?"

"Stick," she replied quickly.

He laughed, and the laugh cleared away some of his perplexity. He leaned forward.

"Stick? All right! Fight it out on the chosen line, eh? Mrs. White, I am sticking to my decision about you, too. You remember what we were talking about the other day—your masculine mind?"

"Yes, I remember," she said very coolly.

"I seem to want to stick to that decision in spite of your marriage. I cannot change my mind. Unreasonable, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is, rather."

"And to-day, now that I look at you, I am more than ever unable to adjust my belief to your statement."

"But it doesn't matter."

"No, of course not, except as I have lost confidence in my own judgment. It gave me a shock that my decision about you was wrong. It was the same day that I completed my line of argument in this case. Could one have influenced the other? Could the jolt of my mistake about you have swayed what I was doing on the case? Could I have lost confidence, and subconsciously have lost my grip on my line of argument?"

"Oh, no! What a queer idea, Mr. Gard!"

"All subconscious performance is queer, Mrs. White. I fancied that my study of sex psychology supplemented my work. I still fancy so, and a wrong step in one might carry over to the other. It is largely a question of confidence or lack of confidence, you see. A big piece of success whirls along to another while the impetus lasts. A defeat—no one wants to start again until the sting of defeat goes. Success leads to more success, defeat to more defeat. Do you understand me?"

"Part way, I understand."

"You'll understand all the way. I was very sure of what I had marked out for you—tremendously sure; and when I found I was wrong, perhaps I was not in perfect trim for the work I was doing on the case. I did not go over my notes; but as I followed them to-day, I was conscious of weakness in them. Twice I hesitated and added to my line of argument as I talked; but I was sure of what I had made ready in advance. That's one of my theories—to do a perfect piece of work and then follow it without thought."

"Yes, I know."

He rose and walked across the room, his hands clasped behind him. He passed in front of her as she stood. He came back and passed again. She waited.

"My failure with you held over and made more failure," he told her. "You were going home. Don't let me keep you any longer."

He continued his walk, and she disappeared. Then he called to her, and she came back into the doorway to hear him.

"My subconscious mind is still unruly. It refuses to accept what does not go with the careful chart I made of you. It is an abnormal condition, and it affected my work on the case. Funny, eh?"

"Yes—funny," she said.

"And not as funny as it is serious. You can't fool with the mind, Mrs. White. I have never been dashed like this before. I don't know what to make of it. Of course, I believe what you say—that is, consciously I believe it. Then up comes the subconscious element, and pushes the other over. I cannot lash them together."

"Is it important?"

"It seems to be. If it affects my work, it is important."

There was a faint wave of color spreading over her face. Her eyes were steady. She seemed like one who could decide.

"Can you suggest anything to correct this condition?" Gard asked her.

She shook her head, and hesitated.

He looked steadily at her. Consciously he tried to put into her mind what was in his own. He had not included mental telepathy in his studies. He had not cared about it; but at that moment he was conscious of the closeness of his thought to hers.

She was so capable, so understanding, so supplemental, as it were, to his own mind, that he wondered if he could give her an impression clear to him, but unknown to her. He looked steadily at her.

She hesitated.

"Nothing must disturb your work," she said judicially.

"Something does."

"It must not!"

"It does."

She hesitated again.

"Would you—would you like to see Mr. White and the—the baby?"

"How do you mean?" he asked quickly. This was exciting. She had picked out of his mind precisely what he had wished her to find there. "How do you mean?" he repeated.

"You might — you could come to the house and see."

Of course, no one had given him a dash of cold water, but for the instant he was shocked and chilled. He shook himself, and laughed.

"That's good of you, to pamper my temperamental fits; but you really owe me the invitation, because of your influence on my argument in that case."

He meant it. He was disturbed. Believing and disbelieving seemed beyond control. He wanted to know! If she had told him the truth, then there was the mystery of mind to be dealt with. He had thought that it might be just a lie getting in his way.

He had not expected the invitation she had just given. If it meant truth, what was the matter with him that he had expected a lie?

He felt suddenly isolated and remote. He recalled irrationally that he had no home, no family. He was lonely, and for no reason at all.

He turned back to his desk.

"Oh, well!" he said. "It is really of no consequence. We'll drop the matter." Then he whirled suddenly. "No, we won't drop the matter! I'll come. Where do you live?"

She gave the address in a businesslike way.

"When may I come?"

"Whenever you want to, Mr. Gard."

"To-night?"

"If you like."

"At what time shall I come? Mr. White—is in business?"

"He teaches at the Stanford High School."

He picked up some papers, and she went out. He heard the door close after her.

III

WAS she really going to produce that husband and that baby? Were they real? They must be. She had proved them by her invitation. That should be enough without personal inspection.

Where, then, was all Gard's study? What the deuce was he to do, in his idle hours, with a wrecked psychology, a shattered metaphysics, which had been his chief joy?

His dinner was a blank thing that night. He thought constantly of the visit he was to make. He was determined to make it, even though "absurd" and similar words called at him from every side.

He had not known that his favorite study had such a grip on him. If it led him to do the abnormal things, then indeed he was going rather far with it. He would give it up for a time, and get some outdoor interest for his leisure hours. He did not want to be a monomaniac. He would change his tack, and mark out a new and safer course.

First, however, he would see this matter to the end. Then he would follow the new and safer course.

It was not until he saw the number she had given, on the door of an apartment house across the street, that it occurred to him to wonder what he would think of another man in his position. Not only that, but what must she think? What must the husband think? Was the imminent Mr. White likely to enter heartily into a visit made to his wife on the plea of a psychological problem?

It might be awkward. Well, let it be!

Then Gard wondered if she was smiling as she waited for him. She had a baffling smile, sometimes—a smile which seemed as if it might hold back a full-sized laugh. He had put himself in a position where his secretary could laugh at him.

Perhaps she was not keeping all this upon the innocuous ground of psychology. She might have the pretty girl's point of view about his interest in her. Heaven knew that he was not a philanderer. He was a student—an earnest man.

Gard was about to cross the street when a man hurried past him and turned in at the door of the apartment house. The stranger was youngish and slender. He wore shell-rimmed glasses, and the word "teacher" was written into his slightly stooped shoulders.

It might be Mr. White. It surely was Mr. White!

Max Gard swung abruptly around.

"What sort of cad am I?" he exploded.

He turned and strode to his club. There he sat down to play cards, with his jaws set.

She came into the office quite as usual the next morning. He began at once:

"At the last minute, Mrs. White, a business matter detained me. Some other time, perhaps; but just the invitation cleared the thing up for me. It settled my mind, and I am grateful to you. It was like taking me into your confidence. I'm going to repay you by taking you into mine. Before very long I am going to have a home to ask you to see."

He dropped the curtain cord that he had been twisting.

"Do you remember Miss Hammond? She came to the office yesterday with her father—the pretty girl—"

"I remember. She is—"

"Yes. You didn't guess it. No one knows it yet; but I thought I'd tell you, as in our talks we have come rather close."

"Yes—we have come quite close," said Janet White.

Then, for weeks, nothing but business was talked in Mr. Gard's office.

IV

One morning Gard stood in his private room, with his hands in his pockets, watching a sparrow that pecked at the iron rods of the fire escape, twitched its dusty tail, and pecked again.

Max Gard was lonely. He depended upon the grimy sparrows for companionship. They were spurs, too, because of their strenuous interest in their pursuits. His own interest in life had slackened.

He crossed the room and closed the door. It was not necessary to leave it open any longer. Certain quick steps had passed through.

At once there was a knock.

She had her little brown hat in her hand.

"Mr. Gard, I must give you my resignation, to take effect in two weeks."

"Resign!" She leaned against the edge of the door. The white collar lying across her breast was moving irregularly.

"You are not in earnest, Mrs. White?"

"Yes, I am in earnest."

"If it is a question of salary—"

"No."

"Or shorter hours, or an assistant, if the work is heavy—"

"No."

"Has anything unpleasant happened about the office?"

"Oh, no, no! It is just this, Mr. Gard."

He looked away. Again he had the odd feeling that she was not telling the truth.

"Mr. White has had a good offer in—in England, where his people live. He thinks that conditions here are not—well, he is sailing on the 14th."

"And you are going?"

"Naturally."

Mr. Gard took her elbow, moved her away from the door, and closed it.

"For the last few weeks you have been unlike yourself," he said sternly. "Now I want you to tell me about it. Perhaps I can help."

She shook her head without speaking.

"You won't tell me? I know it is not a small thing, for you are not that kind. Mrs. White, your marriage—it is not happy!"

"Oh, yes, indeed!"

"I don't believe it. All my intuition, all my knowledge, presses me to know that it is wrong. Mr. White—"

He stopped. What was he about to say of Mr. White? That he was utterly meaningless and insignificant, except that he was her husband? Should Gard tell her that?

He might tell her, too, if he got started, that for weeks everything had been flavored with the certainty that that pale, scholarly-looking young man owned her — that his arms had encircled her, that he had probably kissed her hair, her eyes, her throat—

Gard abandoned all inclination to tell anything, and spread out his hands in a broad gesture which meant that he had come to the end of words.

"You are wrong," she said with dignity. "My resignation, Mr. Gard—I told you to-day, because you are leaving town for the trial of the Grant case." She knew his engagements and managed them. She knew the times of trains. "You will be gone two weeks," she finished.

"Yes."

"I shall have left before you come back."

"Yes."

"I'd like to say that you have been very kind to me, and I'd like to wish you happiness in your coming marriage."

"Thank you. I hope it will be greater happiness than yours."

"I hope it will be as great, Mr. Gard."

"Why do you hold the table edge so tightly, Mrs. White?"

"I don't," said Janet White, relaxing.

Into the silence, she spoke first.

"There are two applications for my position. Shall I select for you?"

"You will not stay until I come back?"

"I cannot. We sail on the 14th."

"Of course! It is rather sudden—at least for me. I dare say you have been considering it."

She did not answer, except to say:

"Your train goes at half past four. It is four o'clock now, Mr. Gard."

She had in her hands the papers he was to take with him. He looked at them blankly. The Grant case—it didn't seem to mean much. He looked back at her.

"Why do your fingers shake?" he said.

"They don't," declared Janet White.

Then the telephone jangled, and he did not see her again.

V

The Grant case went on its uninterrupted way. Gard was keen, competent, satisfying to himself. He won the case. Then he went home, his impetus draining as he drew nearer to the office.

It was a half holiday, and the rooms were deserted. His calendar said that it was the 14th. He wondered if the Whites had sailed. He didn't know what boat they were taking. What business did he have to think anything about it?

He walked back and forth across the room, and stared out of the window. It may not have been the same sparrow pecking at the fire escape, but it might as well have been. The round of life had begun again—the succession of days, all as nearly alike as the sparrows.

He turned sharply, although he had heard no sound. She stood at the open door.

"I—I thought perhaps I had forgotten something," she said.

"And have you?"

"I—"

"Do you sail to-day?"

"Yes."

"What boat?"

She named it.

"Is the new secretary engaged?"

"Yes."

"Is she like you?" he said, catching for composure. She was so slight, so close to him! "Is she like you? Has she the masculine mind that has—what should it have, Mrs. White? Let me see how well you have learned your lesson. What does the masculine mind have?"

She struggled, too. He saw it, and his heart leaped. She tried to laugh.

"The masculine mind has good taste, justice, sense—oh!" she cried, flinging up one arm, "I have no sense at all, and I have—oh, no control—none—any more!"

"Janet," he said huskily, "what is all this?"

Then there was nothing more to be said, for unexpectedly he had taken her in his arms, and his lips were against hers—new warmth, new wonder, new glory—like nothing else—ever!

He released her, and she stepped back. She fenced herself away with a chair.

"Janet!"

She flung one arm across her face and fled. Her little brown hat was crushed by his embrace.

So that was it, then! He looked about the empty room. The schedule of her character was on his desk. He picked it up, and looked at it as at something new. Did he do that—that calm, careful thing? Was that what he wanted—to make schedules of what she was? No! He knew it fiercely—he had never wanted that. His disciplined mind, all that was himself, was merged into his longing for a touch of her, whether it was her hand or a fold of her skirt—and forever and forever, as long as he lived, that touch of her lips!

To face a situation directly is a man's job. Whether facing it bravely or in a cowardly way, to face it is the thing.

Max Gard did that. He had often wondered why other men forgot all else for their women, and why he liked women but remembered other matters. Well, for once in his life, he had forgotten.

In his early days of psychological study, he had made, under the direction of his teacher, a very fine chart of his own character. That chart was no good at all. He was not what he had been listed to be. He had done the impossible, had lived for weeks upon the incredible. Was that all a careful chart was good for—to be compared later with the real character? He had kissed Janet White rapidly, and he did not know how many times. That act was not listed for him, nor was the vast sudden emptiness that had come upon him.

He looked out at the pecking sparrow—the same one, or another—no matter. There was nothing that mattered left in the world. He had discovered himself, and he was a stranger with but one thing sure—that analyses of character were the play of infants.

But it was clearly and distinctly over. This other man's wife had gone half the width of the world away. She had not even given Gard her address.

It was clearly and distinctly over, no matter where she might go. Therefore, as it was over, there was no reason why he should not have one last look at her, just to remember her more clearly. It seemed as if he could not quite recall how she looked.

He put on his hat. Surely he might be allowed to see her at a distance! She would never know of it.

He counted upon the shelter of the crowd at the dock. There was such a crowd that he could not find her at first. She must have gone aboard. She was down in a stateroom. He knew staterooms. They were mighty intimate things, and the bespectacled school-teacher was there—close to her. He could not help but be close.

Then he saw her. She was kissing a baby, and then she was lost to sight as the crowd swept along.

Something was happening to the gangplank. Gard could not see what, for his vision jiggled back and forth; but the boat was moving. There was a ribbon of water lying there, and Janet was waving—on his side of the ribbon.

He had no time to go politely through the crowd toward her. The crowd had no business to be there, anyhow.

As she turned, her shoulder touched his. She recoiled, and stared at him over her finger tips, with which she had clutched her lips and chin.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded weakly.

"What are you?" he returned.

Her gaze followed his across the ribbon of water to where he saw a face with shell-rimmed glasses and a baby's blue bow, at the rail of the steamer. He took her arm, not very gently, and guided her behind a partition where there was luggage.

"Now let's have the truth of this!"

She backed away and looked frightened.

"You made me very angry," she said. "You hurt my vanity, and so I said—"

"You said what?"

"His name was White, too. There were three White families in the building. I knew them very well. I liked the baby, and I thought it might be funny—"

"Very funny!" said Max Gard grimly. "It has been very funny to me for quite a while. Has it to you?"

She shook her head.

"So you said you were married to—"

"To see what you would say. I had to go on. I couldn't let it affect your work. I had to make you sure—oh, don't! Don't! We must never see each other again! You mustn't hold me like this!"

"Why not?"

"Because of her—Miss Hammond—the pretty girl."

"Oh, that!" he said. "That was not true, either. I wanted to see what *you* would do. I tried it on you, too, to see how it would work."

"It worked all right," she murmured.

"Suppose I had come to see them that night—what were you going to do?"

"Oh, I knew you wouldn't come," said Janet White.

The House of the Wicked

A STORY OF ADVENTURE AND INTRIGUE IN THE FAR EAST

By Eleanor Gates and Frederick Moore

FRANCIS WEATHERBEE, an adventurous young American wandering through the Far East, ships as second mate on the schooner Lillebonne, from Manila to Java. The captain of the schooner, Blodgett, proves to be a sodden drunkard, and the first mate, Noakes, such a brutal tyrant that on a misty night, off the coast of Borneo, Weatherbee slips away in a small boat. Rowing shoreward, he finds himself in the mouth of a river, and in the mangrove jungle that fringes the water he stumbles upon a good-sized steamer. At first the vessel seems to be derelict, but on climbing aboard Weatherbee discovers a surprising state of things.

The vessel is the Tai-Lan, owned by Thaddeus Stone, a great figure in the trade of the East. Stone, an elderly millionaire, has suspected his wife, a beautiful girl, of an intrigue with a younger man named Houghton. To punish these two, he has trapped them on the Tai-Lan—which has been reported lost in a typhoon—and is holding them as prisoners in this remote hiding place, with a white man named Markin and three native servants as their jailers. Markin frankly explains the situation to Weatherbee, and tells him that as he now knows Stone's secret he cannot be permitted to leave the Tai-Lan.

To this virtual imprisonment the American has to submit. He meets his fellow prisoners in the ship's dining saloon, which is divided by wire partitions into two compartments, one for Mrs. Stone—or Ellice Loring, to use her maiden name—and one for Houghton. Here they are quartered—not in physical discomfort, for they are well fed, and have books and a piano—but under the cruel mental torture of being practically buried alive in their sunless, solitary cages.

On telling Houghton of his experience aboard the Lillebonne, Weatherbee learns that the schooner is one of Stone's ships, and is probably bringing supplies for the Tai-Lan. The prospect of the arrival of Blodgett and Noakes is an alarming one.

X

OVERHEAD, on the deck of the Tai-Lan, the pounding and scraping of the sea ladder ceased. Weatherbee shook his head regretfully.

"I'm afraid I forgot our situation when I asked you to sing," he said to Ellice Loring. "It came exactly at the wrong time. They'll think we're too cheerful, and—"

"No, no!" she interrupted, and waved a white hand indifferently.

"If they were to take away your piano," he went on, "I should feel that it was my fault."

"No danger," she declared. "You forget that the piano was put here for me to use. I fancy our master jailer, as he sits thinking about us in Manila, or wherever he is, enjoys himself like a man who catches and cages birds, and then allows them to go on singing. It salves what is left of his conscience, for he can pride himself on his generous treatment," she concluded, with a laugh.

A crash against the side of the Tai-Lan, somewhere forward, told of the dropping of the ladder overside. Through the nearest port, over which a piece of mosquito netting was moving gently in the breath of wind, there sounded a loud, clear voice, in which there was a touch of jocularity:

"Hello there, Nick!"

"That's Blodgett!" whispered Weatherbee at Houghton's ear. "Maybe Noakes hasn't come."

Now Markin answered, his words being somewhat blurred:

"How are you, captain? Didn't expect you for another month."

"Orders from the chief. Say, you ain't got any news for me, have you?"

"What makes you ask?"

"Oh, I don't mean the lady and her friend. I just heard her concert. No—I've had the devil's own luck. New second mate of mine jumped out in the night when we was anchored a mile or so out, and took my dinghy. What 'll we do?"

Markin was evidently in a playful mood.

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"Is he a tall, handsome young gent, dressed up like a beach comber?" he inquired facetiously.

"You *got* him?"

The captain, apparently, was not convinced by the description.

"That's all right," Markin answered. "I got him. Look right here, cap'n—here's your dinghy!"

"A-a-a-ah!"

It was a rumbling bellow that came from a third throat, and it expressed diabolical satisfaction.

Weatherbee and Houghton exchanged a quick glance. There was no need to speak. Both knew that, under the bows of the Tai-Lan, was the man most to be dreaded.

Then Noakes's voice sang out:

"So you picked up that dude, eh? Well, that's the best thing I've heard since they told me, 'Blinker Noakes, you're born!' Skipper, recollect what you promised? If he was here, you said he was mine to handle. Well, I'll learn him to jump ship!"

"How'd you come to get him?"

This was Blodgett once more, and it seemed as if he was avoiding an answer to the mate.

Markin guffawed.

"Spied him just outside, in a wisp of fog. Put my glasses on him, and didn't recognize him; but as I knew the dinghy was from the Lillebonne, I made up my mind I'd better call him in and be on the safe side. Of course, at first, I thought you'd sent him, but as he didn't seem to be looking for the Tai-Lan, I tinkled the gong, and he pushed into the brush down there, looking as puzzled as a monkey. When he found the old ship, he was still more upset; and when he came aboard, I could see that he didn't know what it was all about. So I invited him aft, after he'd prowled for a while in the chart room."

Blodgett burst into loud laughter. He was plainly relieved and happy to find that Weatherbee was not at large; but Noakes rolled out an oath.

"Aw, he knowed you was here! He got away from the Lillebonne just to find you, never suspecting *we* would come up the river. I savvy that guy! I been on to him since he put foot in the schooner!"

"I think you're wrong," Markin observed carelessly. "He couldn't see the Tai-Lan from where he was. Leastways, he couldn't see that it was a ship. I've tried it from the river myself."

Noakes began to growl.

"If he could or he couldn't," he retorted, "anyhow, I'll give him a few pointers on sneakin' off and takin' a boat along!"

A moment, and there came a straining and a creaking, as pressure was put on the wooden cross bars of the ladder. Some one was mounting to the steamer's deck.

"Suppose we sit down," suggested Houghton.

His voice was curiously strained. When he seated himself, he raised the heel of his right foot, rested the toe of his dress pump on the matting, and fell to jigging his knee. Weatherbee had noted the same habit only a short time before.

"This man is quiet," he reflected, "but, underneath all that quiet, he's wretchedly nervous!"

For some reason, he did not feel nervous himself.

"I suppose," he pondered, "that after a man's done just so much worrying over a thing, he works his worry off, and he's prepared to take it as it comes. Maybe I'm confident, because I know that with one good blow on the jaw I can lay my friend Noakes out flat. In that case, I shan't let him up again. He'll stay flat!"

As several pairs of shoes thumped and pounded the deck above, coming aft along the saloon deck, Houghton faced around upon the younger man. It became evident that what was going through Weatherbee's mind was also in the mind of his companion—the thought of a fight.

"In spite of what Miss Loring has said," he began, "if they insult you, don't fight, except as a very last resort. I mean, don't fight until you're sure beyond a doubt that whether you fight or not you're in for hard treatment. I'll tell you why, Mr. Weatherbee. If you fight, and they're rough with you, I shall be tempted to be drawn into the trouble. Well, that's what I don't want to happen. I must go on living, and I want you to go on living. You understand me, I am sure. You'll keep your temper, won't you? We mustn't run any chances of leaving this girl shut up down here alone!"

Weatherbee's reply was as hearty as he could make it.

"We don't want to leave Miss Loring alone," he declared. "We surely don't. I see your argument. I'll remember your caution. I won't forget how she's situated."

A curious smile crossed Houghton's grave face.

"Sometimes it's a bit difficult for a man to hold himself," he went on. He jerked his head toward a near-by cabin door. "I've got some golf clubs in there, and I would hate to tell you how many hundreds of times I've rehearsed using them on somebody!"

His knee danced harder than ever.

"Natural enough," was Weatherbee's comment.

Silently he made a point of remembering the clubs.

After that, for a while, no more was said. At intervals, a yellow light, diffused and faint, would strike upon a port, and upon the branches hanging against it, as if a lantern were being moved in the boat which had come alongside. At the same time, the three who were listening and waiting could hear more poundings and thumpings on deck.

"Supplies for the Tai-Lan," Houghton explained. "They're always put aboard at night, like this. That shows, I think, that they don't let the native crew in on the secret. They probably make 'em believe that the boxes, and so on, are for some settlement not far away, or that it's a bit of smuggling or gun running."

To Weatherbee, the transshipment of the stores in the night cleared away all that had puzzled him.

"This is what Noakes didn't want me to see," he said. "Naturally, I would ask more questions than a native sailor, or I would keep quiet and draw my own conclusions. Also, when I got back to Manila, I would surely do some dangerous talking!"

"They'll leave you here with us, right enough," added Houghton, with finality.

An hour passed. Evidently the boat's load of stores was aboard, for Markin and his guests could be heard from the direction of the well deck, where chairs were being pulled about. Glasses could be heard clinking, too, and there was the constant murmur of conversation, with much rough laughter.

"I don't believe they'll come in here tonight," Weatherbee declared. "It's late, and they'll stay out where it's cool."

Houghton roused himself.

"Ellice, my dear girl," he said, "you might as well get some rest while you can."

Leaning back in a low grass chair, facing them, she moved her dark head from side to side.

"I couldn't rest," she answered cheerfully. "There's no use of my trying to sleep. I won't hide the truth from you. I expect those three gentlemen to make a call. Oh, not to look at you and me, Will! The captain and his assistant will want to refresh their eyes with the sight of their lost second mate." She smiled. "I know that if I'm here when they come, they'll behave better than if I weren't here, and you two were alone."

"You're anxious," asserted Weatherbee, "and I'm the cause of your anxiety. I'm sorry for that. Supplies have been brought here before, and you didn't worry. Well, if you can, look at it this way, please, both of you—a few hours ago, neither of you knew I was on the face of the earth. No matter what happens, forget, a few hours from now, that you've ever seen me."

To that neither Houghton nor the girl made any reply; but the former, rising and coming to his visitor, held out his hand.

"I'm going to say good night," he announced; "but not because I'm going to bed, for I'm not. It's you who must have some rest. You look tired enough to fall over sidewise."

"You're right," said Weatherbee, as he shook hands. "I'm as tired as a dog; and it's good common sense to get rested as much as possible before anything happens."

"Stay here five minutes longer," bade the elder man. "I'll change into something lighter. Then I'll take the first watch. When it's past midnight, I'll wake you."

Houghton disappeared into a cabin, but without entirely closing the door. Left alone, Weatherbee sat down again. The girl fanned herself languidly, but neither spoke.

Presently, as he listened intently, Weatherbee realized that the voices outside were drawing away and away, slowly, gradually. As they went, they lulled him, so that he could not help closing his eyes.

When he awoke, Houghton was beside him again, wearing a soft white shirt and duck trousers. A glance at his own watch showed Weatherbee that nearly three-quarters of an hour had passed. He sprang up, a trifle disconcerted at being caught asleep.

"But I'm as fit as a fiddle," he declared, "and I couldn't sleep again right away, to save my life. It's always like that when I get forty winks; so you take a nap."

Houghton smiled a wry smile.

"I couldn't settle down, either," he confessed. "What do you both say if I read?"

He read; but it was soon evident that neither of the others was listening.

"As I don't know myself what I'm reading," Houghton admitted, chuckling, "I suppose the best thing that two of us can do is have a game of cards."

It was over the game of cards, when Weatherbee could speak so that the girl would believe he was referring to the game, that he made a suggestion.

"Mr. Houghton," he half whispered, "when that bunch shows up, I want them to find us quarreling. Then do you demand that I should be taken out of here. If I stay, I'm going to be a source of worry to Miss Loring."

Houghton would not consent to carry out the suggestion.

"No," he said, going on with his playing, and also speaking low, "I don't want you to leave. You're on the Tai-Lan for good, and that means under lock and key; and there's no other place where you can be comfortable—and be safe for Markin. Don't mention such a thing to Ellice Loring. You can be a great help to her, if you will. Stay with us, Weatherbee, until fate gives us a new deal."

"But if Noakes starts any brutal tactics here?"

"You're safest here."

They played a second game, and then sat back, unable to concentrate their minds even on the cards. There was to be only a short period of suspense. Presently, with a rattling of a ring knob on some door of the social hall above, the voices of the three men suddenly broke loudly upon the ears of the prisoners. Harshest and most blatant of all was the voice of Noakes.

"Here they come!" announced Weatherbee, under his breath.

At once they lighted cigarettes. Then, with a composure that his inner feelings belied, Weatherbee sat back in his chair. Ellice Loring was continuing to fan herself languidly. Houghton pretended to be half asleep.

With his heart uncomfortably active, Weatherbee essayed a smoke ring—as down the companion came three pairs of feet.

Markin led the way. When all of him was in sight, this was such a changed Markin that Weatherbee, watching, with head tipped back and lids half lowered, almost forgot the mate, who came last.

Markin's walk was different; so was his general bearing. He did not shuffle. He kept his head up. His air was official. He ignored his prisoners—Weatherbee included. The smiles which, throughout the day, had wreathed his full face were gone. Now his expression was dark, lowering, sulky.

When Markin spoke, Weatherbee realized that even his speech was not what it had been throughout the day. He did not drawl lazily, or clip his words. He was curt, precise.

"He'll bear close watching," he was saying. "I don't want to criticize you gentlemen, but you let a sly one get through your fingers this time!"

As Markin halted at the bottom step of the stairs, Blodgett came lurching past him. The captain's long, sea-browned countenance was flushed with both liquor and anger. He carried his big, awkward frame unsteadily.

"So here you are!" he burst out at Weatherbee. "You're a parlor sailor, I see. First-class passenger stuff is what you want. Step up to this wire and lemme git a look at you! I've got a word to say to you, I have! Come, I say! Stand to your feet!"

Weatherbee did not obey, but he took the cigarette from between his lips.

"Skipper," he said good-naturedly, "please come back at a more suitable time to talk about this matter. Come back when you're sober."

The captain's long face was divided by a stiff black mustache. This now began to lift and fall belligerently, as Blodgett stuffed his hands into his pockets, sprawled his feet in order to secure his balance, and squared himself in front of Weatherbee's chair.

"Friends of yours, eh, this couple?" he demanded. "That's the kind of cattle I shipped, is it — a man that's working against my owner?"

"I don't care to serve under a drunken captain," replied Weatherbee.

With a deep, explosive breath, Blodgett swung himself half around and made back unsteadily toward the companion.

"All right, Mr. Noakes," he announced thickly. "You take him over. This place is too hot for me!"

He hauled himself up the stairs by a hand on the brass railing.

Noakes slouched forward in his heelless slippers. His yellow eyes were wide.

"Just a accident that you skipped when we was off the mouth of this river, warn't it?" he demanded harshly. "Ba-a-ah! You think I'm a fool, hey? I know the low-down on why you jumped out—somebody hired you to ship with us. Now own up, you swine!"

Weatherbee answered quietly.

"Use your brain, Mr. Noakes," he suggested. "If I'd known about the Tai-Lan, would I have come straight to her, in order to have the pleasure of talking to you again? Or would I have waited until you had cleared out with the Lillebonne?"

A gleeful grin showed the toothy gap in the mate's mouth. He gave a toss of his head that sent his stringy, bleached locks off his narrow forehead.

"Sure enough!" he exclaimed. "I thought you was playin' us slick, but you was just gettin' away from work—and me! Well, you done it, didn't you? Here's the best place to have a rest any man ever found—to have a rest and be a reg'lar pet!"

The mate's thin, bristling face twisted in laughter. Weatherbee continued to smoke composedly.

"The thing to do is not to let him feel that he's got a rise out of me," he thought. "Taking the situation indifferently will bring down his tail feathers."

"And won't you be pleased," Noakes went on, "when I tell you that you're goin' to be a pet of mine? Ha-a-a-a-a! Won't that be fine? You see, Mr. Markin here, he's goin' on his vacation, and for a spell I'm to be in charge of the Tai-Lan."

Houghton sprang up.

"Mr. Markin, I object to this change of command," he declared angrily. "You know yourself that the man beside you is unfit to take over this job. Look at him—unclean, shiftless, ignorant!"

Noakes burst into loud and raucous laughter.

"Worse'n that!" he taunted. "I don't wonder you object! Go ahead! Keep it up! It 'll do you a lot of good!"

Then, for half a minute, there was silence. Weatherbee stayed in his chair, the butt of his cigarette between his fingers, his look on Houghton. To challenge the plans of his jailers was, as he knew, useless. His mind was centered on that golf bag full of metal-headed sticks.

Houghton once more addressed Markin.

"So far," he said, his voice trembling with the force of his emotions, "though we've been outrageously treated by being shut up here, we give you credit for courtesy and consideration; but this man! It isn't in him to give us either courtesy or consideration. And here, locked away from the light, and from life, almost, is this young woman—"

Noakes broke out into laughter again.

"Oh, you're worried about *her*, all right, all right!" he observed ironically.

Markin took a letter from an inner pocket of his coat.

"Mr. Stone's orders," he said briefly. "They were brought by Captain Blodgett. I can't alter 'em. Mr. Noakes is in charge now."

"But you're coming back again, Mr. Markin?"

"Say, they're crazy about you, Nick!" chortled the mate, shifting his gangling figure from slipper to slipper.

Markin was answering.

"Don't bring on trouble—I'll be back in a month."

"Then you'll leave orders about our treatment?" persisted Houghton. "It will be understood that things will go on here as they have these last fourteen months? You certainly haven't the heart to go out from this swamp and know, as you go, that we're going to be abused and insulted!"

At that, Weatherbee rose and stepped forward.

"Mr. Markin," he began, "you know as well as I do that there can be no feeling against this gentleman here, and the young lady. In the eyes of the new commander of the Tai-Lan, I'm the only one who deserves bad treatment. Well, I feel that if I'm taken—"

But Houghton would not let Weatherbee proceed.

"No, no, no!" he cried vehemently. "I know what you're going to say—you want to be put in another part of this steamer, where you can be knocked around without our seeing it; but neither Miss Loring nor I will consent to that. We protest, Mr. Markin! We protest with every ounce of humanity in us! Mr. Stone thinks he owes us this awful punishment. We have submitted, because there was nothing else to do; but this man has done nothing. Certainly the leaving of the Lillebonne shouldn't lay him open to ill usage or torture. We want him here with us, Mr. Markin. I beg of you not to make the change he asks for. It's splendid of him, but—"

Markin raised a hand to make an impatient gesture, as if the pleading annoyed him. It was Noakes who spoke.

"Houghton, you'll git along all right with me, if you behave yourself," the mate observed significantly; "but I don't like swank, if you git what I mean. When a man's behind the wire, the best thing he can do is to be quiet and easy like, and hold his tongue."

Houghton turned his back on the mate and walked away.

"I'll stand for no lawlessness, mind that!" Noakes went on. "The way you're treated will depend on how you behave, and you can just put that in your pipe and smoke it! Beginnin' to-morrow, I'm master aboard the Tai-Lan, and all by myself. Things 'll run as usual; but none o' you'd better lose sight of the fact that I'm master here!" He faced toward Markin. "You mean to say they've got *books?"* he demanded.

"Orders," was the laconic reply.

"My land!" returned the mate, disgusted. "Books, and a piano!" His peaked face was turning in the opposite direction now. "Comforts of trippers is what I call 'em. Why, the place is run like a liner! No wonder this bunch feels high and mighty! What's needed here is a shift o' tricks, that's what! When a man like you comes in, Mr. Markin, these guys ought to be made to stand up to attention, properly respectful."

Houghton turned around and again addressed Markin.

"You ought to be able to see right now how things are likely to be with us when you're gone from this ship, and we're at this man's mercy!" he said.

Markin tossed his arms impatiently.

"I been here longer than I took on for," he replied with temper. "It's a lazy life, but a little of it goes a long ways. I've treated Mr. Stone the best I know, but I need a change. I can't dictate to Mr. Noakes how he's to run things. He's in control, I tell you. Behave yourselves, and I guess you'll get along all right."

Houghton faced toward Weatherbee and stared, his face colorless and working. Plainly he was aghast at the new situation—something neither of them could have possibly foreseen.

Markin was about to go. As if a sudden humorous thought had occurred to him, he glanced toward Houghton.

"But I'm glad to hear you're hankering for me to return," he observed. "I'm quite a pleasant gentleman, I am. It 'll seem nice to be missed!"

"You mean that life aboard the Tai-Lan, from now on, is going to be hell for us," Houghton retorted.

Noakes chuckled as he swung slowly around upon the speaker.

"If a hell's what you're lookin' for," he said jovially, "I can match any man at that game. You make things hard for me, I'll make things hard for you. Oh, I'm always fair, I am! I give back exac'ly what's give me. As for this crimson explorer of Borneo rivers"—he grinned at Weatherbee—"he ain't done with me, as he'll jolly well find out. There ain't no Cap'n Blodgett to stand in my way here. I'm top boss!"

"Oh, let it go at that!" snapped Markin, as if he himself were weary of the other's covert threats.

Weatherbee turned to Houghton.

"I believe," he remarked, "that all the while I was aboard the Lillebonne I was under suspicion, and that I was being brought right here. Skipping the schooner, and being lured in here by Markin, simply saved them the trouble of bringing me here as a prisoner."

Once more Noakes laughed outright.

"You got it!" he declared. "Here was where I told the cap'n you belonged. If we didn't land you here, you'd have landed us all in Bilibid Prison, or some other place, for the balance of our lives."

Weatherbee did not answer him.

"Steady as she goes!" continued Noakes, quite as if he had been replied to impudently. "We'll git on fine, old chum, you and me! How about the lady passenger?"

The palm leaf fan was going steadily. It continued to wave. The girl did not turn her eyes toward the four men.

"S'pose I have a look at her," persisted Noakes. "Any objection, Mr. Markin?"

"Not a bit from me."

"Stand up, lady!" Noakes gave the order lazily. "I like to see what kind of folks I'm goin' to be in charge of."

He sauntered close to the wire screen on that side. Miss Loring did not seem to have heard him.

"So-o-o!" remarked Noakes. "You think you can snub me, do you? Well, maybe you can; but maybe, also, it 'd be nicer if you was to say 'good evenin',' nice and pretty, like one decent citizen to another. You seem to forgit, lady, that I'm takin' over Mr. Markin's job."

Still she did not notice him. He shrugged. Markin was now at the foot of the companionway, evidently impatient to be gone. The mate turned that way.

"All right-oh," he said easily; "but when Mr. Markin's gone, and I'm skipper here all by my lonesome, it's goin' to be all hands on their feet when I show up, I can tell you that! A new rule! Also, Mr. Markin, it strikes me there's too much tobacco wasted down in this place. It ain't good for the air—smells up the place so it's stale and bilgy below here."

Though the light was dim, Weatherbee could see that the girl's face was blazing with wrath. Noakes saw it, too. He pointed a finger at her.

"I guess you'll come into the wind before I'm done with you!" he promised pleasantly. "If you'll remember that topgallant manners and fancy duds don't go with me, it might help things along. 'Speak when you're spoken to' is a rule of mine. I got other rules, too—good ones! From to-morrow on, they'll go in this old hulk, or I'll know a good reason!"

"Come out of this hot hole!"

It was Markin who spoke, from halfway up the companion, his tone showing suppressed annoyance.

"Right-oh, Nicky!" Noakes took another half dozen steps, stopped again, thrust his fingers into the wire mesh on the side occupied by the men, and shook it, as if testing its strength. Then, speaking very loud to Markin above him, whose feet only were visible on the steps: "I should think open ports would be dangerous for us. I'm agin pampering this outfit. A little work to do is my idea of runnin' the Tai-Lan, and not so much time for litterchoor. Make the bunch dig, and give the rest of the ship a rest—Chink and all. Ye-ah—that would be real popular, I'm thinkin'!"

Weatherbee, looking at the long-haired, wizen-faced mate, made one comment to himself.

"You black villain!"

"Yes, yes, yes!" Markin called down irritably.

Noakes was following at a leisurely pace. He paused on the bottom step.

"Cure 'em of airs!" he drawled.

Whereupon he stopped long enough to do a little dance and strike an impudent attitude.

Then Weatherbee, watching that evil countenance, saw it suddenly change, and in a way that puzzled and dumfounded him. The amber eyes looked into his intently, and with meaning. Next, having glanced in the direction of the stairs to the social hall, Noakes gave the two men an exaggerated but solemn wink. Last of all, as he moved off, he puckered his unshaven lips and began to whistle—carelessly, and so low that what he was whistling was barely audible.

The tune was "Annie Laurie."

XI

The whistled strain died away on the dark stairway.

A moment later, Weatherbee, who did not yet guess that there was anything significant about the trilling of the old song, got his first hint of the truth. Houghton and Ellice Loring started to their feet. Then, rigidly immobile, they looked up the carpeted steps to where Noakes had just disappeared. On both their faces was blank amazement.

Next, with a choking cry, the girl swayed around until her back was toward the two men; and then, trembling with emotion, and whispering half aloud, she dropped to her knees beside a chair. As for Houghton—whom Weatherbee had judged to be habitually composed and self-controlled, even if there was extreme tension under his usual quiet—he began to pace to and fro in his half of the dimly lighted saloon, his cheeks glistening with tears that he did not attempt to hide.

Weatherbee pondered as he watched the two.

"Something has affected them all at once," he said. "They're not mourning. They're just about crazy with joy. Now what under the shining sun—"

Presently, he came nearer to the truth.

"It was the way Noakes looked and winked," he decided. "And then, too, he whistled 'Annie Laurie'—that was the same tune Houghton whistled at me. H-m! This is a funny proposition! If 'Annie Laurie' means something good to them, how does it happen to be mixed up with that skinny devil of a Noakes?"

He frowned, for he was not only puzzled, but annoyed.

"Noakes!" he thought. "That imp of

Satan can't have anything to do with what means good to anybody! *Noakes,* of all creatures in the world! Why, why—pshaw, it isn't so! I'm on the wrong track—a million miles northeast of the real facts, probably."

" Ellice?"

It was Houghton, addressing the little white heap across the corridor. Up came the dark head, and the girl smiled back.

" Yes, Will—I'm all right."

" Dear child!" Houghton returned, his voice breaking.

As once more Ellice Loring buried her face in her arms, Weatherbee knew that, impossible as it might seem, the conclusions he had arrived at were correct. Houghton and the girl were like new beings. Beyond question, the melody had worked the transformation in the prisoners. " Annie Laurie " was a signal.

" By thunder, yes!" he vowed silently. " Houghton tried it on me, but I didn't know its meaning, and that's why she cried, and he looked discouraged. They realized that I wasn't sent here to help them; but now this hellion of a Noakes has whistled it, and they're dizzy with happiness. Sure, it's a signal—can't be anything else! It means help."

Help from Noakes! It was this that was so difficult to comprehend, to square with all that Weatherbee knew about the scrawny, mean-faced, overbearing, insulting specimen from whom he had fled because he did not wish to commit murder.

" This low-down slave driver," he marveled, " doesn't seem to be what I thought he was at all. Well, of all the surprise parties that I've ever had in all my born life!"

The girl was speaking again.

" I don't want to be foolish, Will, but I—I—"

" I understand," he soothed. " You aren't any more foolish than I am. Just rest, dear child. Take it easy. You've had so much to stand to-day."

Somewhere a door slammed. To ask for absolute silence, Houghton drew his breath through his teeth sharply; then all kept still to listen. Evidently Kum Lee was busily preparing a late supper, for the three could hear him rattling his pots and pans, and singing over and over a bar or two of some shrill Chinese song in a high, squeaking falsetto.

They could also hear quick footsteps in the galley passage, where Dukun was probably hurrying back and forth with trays. From the well deck came a chorus of men's voices. The talk was loud, the laughter boisterous.

" Booze, do you think?" Houghton asked Weatherbee.

" Shouldn't wonder."

" Does—er—that Noakes fellow drink?"

" Coffee."

" Glad of that! As a rule, if a man's bad, he's just so much harder to deal with if he liquors up."

Weatherbee felt a sting of something between mortification and jealousy.

" They don't intend to make a confidant of me," he concluded. " They don't fully trust me yet. That's all right—I don't blame them. How could they feel sure of me? They can't. For all they know, I may be here to trick them. I may be in cahoots with Markin and Stone. But they're strong for Noakes—for the man I've been abusing since I got down here!"

The situation had its humorous side, too. He laughed silently at himself.

" It certainly is a cracking fine joke on me!" he thought. " Here I've figured that Noakes treated me as rottenly as he could because he was too all-fired mean to live; and all the time there were other reasons that I didn't know of."

He made a resolution. He would not pry—would not ask a single question.

" What means good luck for them," he argued, " means good luck for me, because we're all in the same pickle. I'll rest the case there, and be Johnny-on-the-spot when I'm needed."

Thinking that his companions might have things to say to each other that they would not care to have him hear, he decided to take advantage of Houghton's offer of clothes. With the latter holding the lamp, Weatherbee selected from the wardrobe cabin a complete change, including pyjamas and white low shoes. He carried the things to a cabin which the elder man said was to be permanently his.

The tiny room was a pleasant surprise. It was scrupulously clean. Evidently it had been got ready for him earlier in the day. Crisp sheets were on the lower berth, the gimbal lamp was polished and full of oil, the floor matting looked new, and on the washstand were plenty of towels, a pitcher of water, and a shaving outfit.

He bathed, shaved, and dressed himself in a suit of silk undergarments, a thin white cotton shirt, and a pair of white duck trousers. The shirt and the trousers were a surprisingly good fit. Inside the waistband of the latter was the label of a Shanghai tailor. The undergarments had never been worn before. In them were the folds and the pins which had been there when they were taken down from a shelf of a dealer in the Calle Rosario, Manila. The shoes were a trifle too large, but comfortable.

When, leaving his own lamp burning, he came out of his cabin and into the light of Houghton's lamp, he became conscious of the fact that his appearance had undergone what was, to them, a startling change. He felt embarrassed and apologetic.

"I'm afraid I didn't know how rough I looked before I washed up," he said to Houghton.

The latter smiled.

"It's made a difference, your shave and so on," he admitted.

He appeared to be weighing something in his mind, and Weatherbee was not slow to guess what the problem was. He decided to speak frankly.

"I imagine you've felt uneasy about me," he began. "Well, all I can say is that I shan't mind if you don't tell me anything; but don't consider me an enemy—please! It's hard to be suspected by both sides. I'm on yours—I swear I am. You can count on me as long as I can stand on my feet and fight!"

Houghton came to him with the air of a man who has settled a doubt to his own satisfaction.

"Mr. Weatherbee," he said, "you look to me like a man who can be trusted."

"Mr. Houghton," answered Weatherbee, "I can."

Houghton clamped a shaking hand around the young man's arm.

"You—you heard that tune?" he asked.

"Yes; but please don't feel that you have to explain anything. I feel that I've complicated the situation here, and—"

"You haven't. I was glad to have you come; but now we're even happier than ever. Do you understand why?"

Weatherbee showed his white teeth in a frank grin.

"I've got my own opinion," he admitted.

Houghton drew in a deep breath.

"We'll soon know for sure. All we've got to do is to wait. Noakes has his orders to stay. Markin will go. Then—"

The younger man looked rueful.

"You'll think I'm an utter idiot about Noakes. Can't help my mistake. Ever since leaving Manila he's acted his rôle of human devil in first-class shape."

"That's all right," Houghton answered reassuringly. He kept his voice low. "Don't forget that we must seem to dislike the man as much as ever. We mustn't stop hating him until Markin's off our decks."

"Right!"

In the early part of the evening they had all been too anxious, too apprehensive, to rest. Now they were too much excited. They dared to talk only a little. They could not read or play cards. Ellice Loring sat in a grass chair, fanning herself, and smiling into space. Weatherbee and Houghton walked about restlessly, or sought one of the screened ports and peered out into the blackness.

"We'll know soon," Weatherbee told himself. "Unless Noakes is still suspicious of me, he'll be back with more than a tune!"

At the end of an hour or so, he discovered that Houghton and the girl, for some reason, did not feel so certain as they had at first on the score of what might happen during the day that was soon to dawn. It was Ellice Loring who first showed doubt.

"Will," she whispered across to Houghton, "you don't think that maybe it's all a trick, do you?"

"A trick?"

"That man might just be tormenting us," she faltered.

Weatherbee hastened to attempt to dispel her misgivings.

"Noakes isn't taunting you," he declared firmly. "If he'd wanted to do that, he'd have done it while Markin and the captain were here. He'd have got as much pleasure out of seeing us all suffer as he could. He'd have told you that you had lost out, that he understood that the tune is a signal, and that you needn't hope."

"Unless he thought he could get more pleasure out of us by first letting us *think* there's a chance," argued the elder man slowly, "and then smashing us in the face with the facts."

The girl spoke again.

"Perhaps a certain person got away, but was captured. If they treated him cruelly enough, wouldn't he be compelled to tell everything? Wouldn't the truth be forced out of him? Perhaps they whipped him, or tortured him!"

Houghton's reply was evasive.

"We won't feel too sure about anything," he said carelessly; "but for a while, anyhow, we'll permit ourselves to hope."

"Oh, I'm afraid it's all too good to be true!" sighed the girl.

"I can only argue as Mr. Weatherbee has," reminded Houghton. "The mate evidently knows the signal. If he's against us, wouldn't he have let Markin and the captain in on the whole proposition? It didn't seem to me that he had done that." He faced Weatherbee again, and with a genial smile. "One thing we can definitely congratulate ourselves upon," he added. "We've got at least one new friend!"

Weatherbee thanked him.

In the well deck, judging by the sounds that came to them at frequent intervals, the trio of merrymakers were still imbibing. Blodgett's voice was the loudest of the three—evidence that he was intoxicated. As for Markin, his speech was as hilarious as it was thick.

To keep the dining saloon as cool as possible, the two gimbal lamps were put out, and the three prisoners sat in darkness. They were talking low and cautiously when, a little while later, they heard a lock being turned in a door of the social hall. The door was opened, and some one entered stealthily.

The three in the dining saloon, waiting with breath suspended, heard that some one advance to the top of the stairway. Preceding him came a little round spot of light, like that cast by a flash light held in the hand. The spot found the top step of the carpeted companionway, and stayed there until the person holding the flash light set a slippered foot into the little circle of brightness.

It was Noakes. He came on down toward them silently. He did not speak until he was standing in the corridor, close to the two men. Then he whispered, so cautiously that he was barely audible:

"Mr. Weatherbee?"

For a moment Weatherbee was too much surprised to answer. The change that had come over Markin was a transition from hearty friendliness to a curt ignoring. Here was another change—one amazingly different, for Noakes, once a brutal tyrant, was now both friendly and respectful. Weatherbee felt sure that he had been utterly mistaken about the mate of the Lillebonne.

The other two had also caught that welcome note in the man's voice. From across where the girl was seated there came a smothered exclamation. Houghton got to his feet.

Weatherbee followed suit.

"Here!" he breathed.

Noakes considerately refrained from flashing his light into the face of any one of the three, and let it go out.

"Markin's asleep," he told them, "and Blodgett's good and drunk, so it 'll be safe enough to tell you what I got to say."

"Man! Man!" broke in Houghton.

"E-e-easy!" The whisper was drawled soothingly. "If Markin was to wake up and find me here, I might have to kill him. Don't speak too loud, will you? You see, I couldn't dope the Chink and the Malay; so when I tell you some things, don't none of you holler out. Don't ask questions, either. I'll tell you everything quick as I can. First off, I want you all to feel sure that I'm on your side. I didn't dast to bring a letter along—was 'fraid I might get searched. 'Stead of a letter, there's something I can tell you, Mr. Houghton, that 'll make you satisfied about me. It's this—once, in the steamer Ta-Ming, you told a friend of yours named Bradley about a planter named Carmichael, and—"

"True!" pronounced Houghton.

"Well, I'm from Bradley. You'll sure believe it if I show you something."

There was a moment's wait, followed by the click of metal, as if two steel objects had come in contact. Then came a sound of soft brushing along the matting, and once more the light shone. In its round yellow spot, lying under the lower edge of the wire partition, were four automatic pistols.

Like one, Weatherbee and Houghton stepped forward, and each stooped to seize a pair of weapons. Thereupon the soft yellow spot was blotted out, again leaving the saloon black; and the silence was as profound as the dark.

Presently Noakes went on:

"When Yatin got away from here, he looked for the guard at the end of the bridge out yonder. If there is such a feller, he didn't happen to be on the job that particular day, because Yatin says he didn't see nobody. He made his way through hundreds of miles of jungle. To make a long story short, Mr. Bradley was setting in his office one morning when a clerk tells him there's a Malay outside that wants to see him. Of course, like everybody else, Mr. Bradley didn't doubt the yarn about the Tai-Lan being lost in a typhoon. Well, here comes in Yatin, in rags, dirty, just a skeleton of a man—"

Houghton murmured gratefully.

"And he told where you and the lady was, and why, only he couldn't give no sailing directions. Say, maybe Mr. Bradley didn't set up and take notice! He took the Malay straight home with him, and had a doctor look him over and fix him up. Next Bradley got me to come to his place, and we dredged Yatin for every scrap of information he had in him. Last of all, on a chance that the lad was stringing us, either for cash or to please somebody smarter'n he was, we checked up on him. The parts of his yarn that we could check held water.

"'Blinker, it's all so,' Mr. Bradley says to me.

"He was strong for having old man Stone arrested, and making him own up to the whole dirty business. The trouble was that Stone was gone somewhere in his yacht, and we couldn't find out where. With you locked up in this smothering hole, we couldn't just set down and do nothing till he come back. We hung on to Yatin close as a barnacle. We certainly was good to him—clothes, money, grub—all that sort of thing. All this while we studied hard about what we could do. We had to go mighty careful. We figured that even if we had your reckonings, we wouldn't want to risk fetching a coast guard for you, because Markin would escape to the jungle after fixing his clockwork to blow this old hulk up.

"The Lillebonne come into port about then. We took Yatin down to look at her. He hadn't been able to recognize the other Stone boats that we'd showed him, but he knowed the Lilly, and he knowed Blodgett by sight; so we figured she was your supply ship.

"'I got a master's ticket,' I says to Bradley. 'I'll go as mate with Blodgett, and bring them folks out of that swamp, if it takes a arm!'

"'You've got a little family, ain't you, Blinker?' he says back to me.

"'Yes,' I answers, 'a wife and baby girl.'

"'I don't want you to take no more chances in this affair than you have to,' he tells me.

"'Well, Mr. Bradley,' I says, 'I can't back down from this, it's so darn rotten bad; and who else could you depend on?'

"He couldn't think of nobody else to handle the job; so—"

"You'll never regret coming," Houghton vowed solemnly.

"That's all right, sir," Noakes replied. "Mr. Bradley, he's been a good friend to me. Well, to go on, Blodgett's mate was a feller named Dow. I hired a little bungalow out Malate way, and put Yatin in charge of it. Then one night, when Dow was drinking at Timke's, I coaxed him into a victoria for a nice, cool, restful ride. We drove up to the bungalow, and that's where he is now, with Yatin waitin' on him. The rest was a pipe. Mr. Bradley worked the business. He got hold of a letterhead from Stone's office, and borrowed a sample of his handwriting from a friend in some bank. He wrote Blodgett, signing Stone's name. The order told Blodgett to take me on as mate, because Dow was being sent on another job, and Stone wanted me to relieve Markin here.

"'Proceed at once,' the order said.

"I went aboard the Lillebonne, handed Blodgett the order, and watched him read it. Say, it was a clincher. It worked like a first-chop charm. The scheme was so blamed flat-footed that Blodgett didn't suspect forgery. It seems that there'd been talk of sending somebody to give Markin a rest, so Blodgett walked right into the trap with both feet.

"I mentioned the Tai-Lan, and pretended I admired Stone, and sympathized with him on account of the low-down way he'd been treated by his wife. Things seemed to be going grand. Then, before we sailed, Blodgett, when he was part drunk, took on Mr. Weatherbee here. That bothered me. I couldn't get out of Blodgett who Weatherbee was, and if he'd ever worked for Stone or not. That explains, Mr. Weatherbee, why I hunted through your dunnage."

"Why were you so confounded hard on me?" Weatherbee wanted to know.

"I could see you was above your job—was too smart for a second mate. I was afraid you was one of Stone's right-hand men. To test how the skipper would act if I was mean to you, I begun picking on you the night we sailed. I discovered that Blodgett didn't bother to take sides; also that you didn't run to him with the story that I was hazin' you. So far, so good.

" 'I won't trust him,' I says to myself. 'I'll make life miserable for him. Either he'll be scared stiff of me, or he'll dig out—and I don't care which. If a break comes betwixt me and the skipper, the second mate 'll mind his own business.' And I went right on roughin' things for you."

"But you allowed me to get away from the schooner."

"Sure! I put the crew on paint work, so that the dinghy could be overside while we was at anchor. I says to myself, 'He'll sneak in toward the coast and hide, or make up the river, and that 'll leave clear sailing for me. On the other hand, if he turns up on the Tai-Lan, why, I'll apologize for thinking he was against Stone—and that 'll fool *him;* but if he don't go away with Blodgett and Markin—if he stays to watch me—it 'll be all over with Mr. Weatherbee before very long!'

"Wasn't I tickled when I knowed you'd skipped sure enough? And maybe it didn't throw Blodgett into the air! That told me what I wanted to know—you and Blodgett weren't in cahoots—you wasn't a Stone man. When the skipper and me got alongside here, though, and Markin told us he had you aboard, it was my turn to hit the sky.

" 'This Weatherbee is Houghton's friend,' I says to myself, but I wasn't able to figure how you'd found out about the Tai-Lan.

"Then Markin bragged how he'd coaxed you along in from the river with the gong, and had you locked up. I swore at you, and he told me that whenever I felt like it I could give you a taste of rope."

"So *that's* how he feels about me!" observed Weatherbee dryly.

"Markin sure is a sweet rascal," Noakes added. "Blodgett's an angel alongside him. I wouldn't trust him the length of my arm. If he gets wise, he'll give us trouble!"

Houghton began to speak in a suppressed whisper:

"The keys, Noakes—the keys to let us out! We'll take our pistols, and go up and make prisoners of that precious pair!"

"Sh-h-h!" cautioned the mate. "I ain't got the keys—not yet. They'll hand 'em to me nice and friendly when they tell me by-by. You see, Mr. Houghton, if I was to do like you suggest, we wouldn't know how to look after that clockwork, would we? He told me about that cute contraption the first five minutes I was aboard here. Good thing he did, too, because I felt like shooting him right down there on his dirty foredeck, exac'ly like I'd shoot a cobra. Didn't I praise the idea, though?

" 'Mr. Markin,' I says to him, 'that insurance business—it means you got a grand brain!' "

Houghton showed irritable impatience.

"Make him prisoner," he urged, "and take the keys away from him. If he's locked up here, he'll tell you how to manage the clockwork, rather than let the steamer blow up with him in it."

Not until later did Weatherbee understand that Houghton, following the secretive arrival of Noakes, had found good news harder to bear than bad. However, while registering his opposition to the elder man's suggestion, he took care to argue with the utmost patience and deference.

"This is the Orient," he reminded. "Out here, if a man's clever, he'll play the game slow and cautiously, the way it's played by the men who've been raised and trained here. That's why I believe in allowing things to take their natural course. Let's learn how to keep ourselves safe from the dynamite; then we'll get possession of the keys, and see the Lillebonne sail. When we all come out of here, you and Miss Loring will be able to take your time in getting your eyes accustomed to daylight. The cook and the Malay boy can be locked up in here. That 'll cut off the chow from the bridge sentry astern. If there is one, and if he comes looking for grub, he's ours!"

"Right!" pronounced Noakes. "You've got it, Mr. Weatherbee. You know, Mr. Houghton, you been so long down here in this dark place that your eyes ain't going to be much good for a spell. The lady, she'll be helpless, too."

"But if you let the Lillebonne go without us," countered Houghton, "and they take their longboat and the dinghy, where's a boat of the Tai-Lan that's seaworthy? Every one must be cracked wide open by now. That means we'll all have to stay where we are."

"We'll soak a boat so she won't leak," the mate answered. "It 'll be no trick at all to get one into the water."

"*Then* where?" demanded Houghton. The new note of vehemence was stronger than ever in his voice. "Are we to drift around, waiting for some schooner to pick us up?"

"There's a settlement just south of here," Noakes explained. "Blodgett told me about it; and the Chink and the Malay'll help us row."

"St! St!"

The sound showed Houghton to be both disgusted and irascible. In the dark, he moved away down the inclosure. Weatherbee stole after him.

"I know what staying on, even for another hour, must mean to you," he said sympathetically; "but, Houghton, for the sake of Miss Loring, let's do this thing in the most peaceful way that we can."

"Yes, yes—just as you say!"

Weatherbee tiptoed back to Noakes.

"I'll turn in now," he announced, "and get some shut-eye. I want to be in good shape to help you to-morrow morning if you need me."

"That's the stuff!"

The light shone just long enough to locate the bottom step of the stairs. Then it described a joyous figure eight in the air, and went out. With a soft scuffing of his slippers, Noakes took himself up and away.

During the next quarter of an hour no one spoke in the dining saloon; but Houghton paced continually, and Weatherbee could hear his hard breathing and his occasional low-muttered exclamations. He decided to address the other on some pretext, and went to join him.

"Now I know why you whistled 'Annie Laurie' at me, Mr. Houghton," he said.

Somewhat to his surprise, Houghton chuckled gayly.

"Do, eh? I was testing you." Then the thoughts of the other went to Yatin. "Malays are strange men," he told Weatherbee. "You think they're not troubling themselves about the fix you're in. They seem cold, and not inclined to talk about your proposition; but all the time they're working things out their own way. Look at this man who's saved us! 'Yatin,' I said to him, 'do you believe you'll be able to get away and fetch help to us?' And he answered, 'Tuan, that is under the gift of the gods. Them must I conciliate by prayers and offerings.' May his gods be kind to him!"

Weatherbee wondered about the girl. In the thick dark, even her white frock was not discernible, and she did not move. He hoped that she was asleep; but presently he heard her whispering tremulously.

"That boat, Will—the one that's to be soaked up tight," she said. "I've got so many lovely dresses with me. I was taking them to Hongkong, and they're fresh and new. I should hate to leave them behind me!"

Houghton did not reply.

"Can't you rest?" Weatherbee asked softly.

"No! All the time I'm thinking, 'Oh, I shall go on deck! I shall see the sky again!' If only I could drive the dark away this very minute! But I'm happy—so terribly happy!"

Now Houghton spoke, and again he showed an ill temper which, even to the younger man, who did not know him, seemed contradictory.

"Please don't announce our departure!" he exclaimed almost rudely.

After that, no one spoke.

The night drew to an end, and the veiled ports became disks of gray, as a meager light filtered through them. Weatherbee made out Houghton, seated by the big table, his arms upon it, and his face hidden.

Across the corridor, the third prisoner was bolt upright. She saw Weatherbee looking, and flashed a dazzling smile his way.

"Hollow-eyed, but happy!" she announced in an undertone.

He nodded.

"Same here!"

A few moments later, as they waited, Weatherbee heard, coming in to him from the swamp outside, a voice that he did not recognize. It was the voice of a man, but not of a young man. It was well modulated and mild.

"Good morning!" it said. "Is Mr. Markin about?"

"Still abed, sir."

Noakes was the second speaker.

Weatherbee heard Ellice Loring rise. Without looking her way, he hurried to the nearest port, put aside the mosquito netting, and looked out. The vines outside were being agitated, evidently by a boat. By craning his utmost, he was able to see the stern of the boat, painted a glaring white.

The mild voice began once more:

"I don't seem to remember you. Where do you come from?"

"Mate of the Lillebonne, sir. Dow had to go on another job, sir, and Captain Blodgett put me in his place. You don't remember me, sir, but I was second mate two years ago in your steamer, the Algerian, when she was on the Saigon run."

"*In*-deed!"

The word was pronounced with a strange inflection.

"Will you come aboard, sir?"

What the mild voice returned, Weatherbee did not hear. His attention was caught by a sound behind him. He drew his head out of the frame of the port, and looked around. It took a moment or two to accustom his eyes to the dim light of the saloon. When he could see Ellice Loring again, he saw that she was standing against the wire wall on her side, the fingers of both hands twined in its iron weave. Her face was chalk-white, its expression mingled horror and despair.

In a smothered voice, she uttered a name:

"Stone!"

XII

"STONE?" repeated Weatherbee.

Then, certain that she was right, he wavered on his feet, as if from a blow. When he could think, it was of the forged letter, and of Noakes.

"Stone will know about the forgery of the orders in the first five minutes," he decided. "He'll ask Markin about the mate, and that 'll fetch out the letter. What then? Do we lose out? We've got our guns. We mustn't wait until we're searched. We can't have them taken. Oh, for one second with Noakes—just one!"

Gently he wakened Houghton, who appeared much as he had on first acquaintance. As briefly as possible, and as quietly, Weatherbee told the news.

His brief rest had evidently done Houghton good, for he matched the younger man in calmness.

"Really!" was all that he said, when he heard that the millionaire was coming up the ladder.

To Weatherbee, Houghton's calmness was disquieting.

"Of course, you understand that it puts us in a bad situation," he reminded his fellow prisoner.

The other laughed.

"Don't worry because I'm not exploding over Stone," he said. "Since coming here, I've learned to smolder. What I'll do if I ever *stop* smoldering—"

"We're armed," broke in Weatherbee. "If we can't get out of this pickle by using our wits—with Noakes to help us on deck—we must fight!"

Houghton felt for his pistols, patted them, and broke into a grin.

"Naturally," he returned. To the girl, standing against the wire, and looking through it at him, he added: "Well, dear child, things *do* come, don't they, to the man that waits?"

She did not reply—did not even move.

"It's struck her dumb," Weatherbee thought. "This can't go on. I wasn't sent here for nothing. Maybe I was born just for this emergency!"

Two or more men had entered the social hall at the top of the stairs. One of them was speaking.

"I'm drawing wages from you, Mr. Stone," he said. "I'm this kind of a man, that I don't never go back on my bread and butter. When I'm hired, Mr. Stone, I'm hired."

"Up there!" shouted Weatherbee. "Somebody come down, will you? Come quick! This woman's cut her wrist! She's bleeding to death! *Help!*"

With a swift scuffing of his slipper-shod feet, Noakes came to the head of the stairs.

"What's the row down there?" he demanded roughly.

When Ellice Loring heard Weatherbee's shout, she stared across at him in bewilderment. Houghton caught the younger man's arm, whispering a question. Weatherbee did not reply; but that he had some definite move in mind both of the others now understood.

He signaled the girl to lie down. Promptly and silently she let herself slip to the matting, with the back of her head resting against the wire, and both of her hands under her.

"Mrs. Stone is dying!" Weatherbee cried next. "Dying, I tell you! Don't wait! Come! Come, for God's sake!"

With all his strength he beat upon the partition against which he stood.

"Well! *Well!*"

This was the mild voice once more. A moment later the bare feet in the slippers, and two other pairs which were immaculately white, came into sight as they descended the companionway.

"Hurry! Hurry!" implored Houghton.

His pleading had in it such a ring of truth that Noakes moved his gangly legs faster, advancing ahead of Markin and his supposed employer.

"Now what's that dame up to?" he scolded. "Is she gone crazy, or what? Ain't she ashamed to act like this when the boss is here?"

He stalked down the corridor toward the huddled figure of the girl.

Weatherbee was looking with mingled emotions at a smallish man in a suit of tropical gray, who followed at a little distance behind Noakes. At either side of Stone's head, showing under the brim of a rather wide straw hat of fine material and native make, was gray hair. The millionaire's mustache was also gray, and military in cut. Below it was a carefully trimmed goatee.

He walked slowly, accustoming himself to the dim light; whereupon Markin forged ahead of him, to join Noakes beside the prostrate figure that lay against the heavy screening.

"Is she breathing?" Houghton quavered. He had no eyes for Stone. "Is she still breathing?"

"Get up! Turn over, and let's have a look at you! What are you trying to pull?" Noakes growled, as he poked the girl's elbow with the toe of a slipper.

"Don't do *that!*" Houghton screamed it, as if fairly beside himself. "Unlock that side! Unlock it quick, and let me in there!"

Markin swung his head halfway around.

"No talk from that side!" he snarled. "If there's any more of it, I'll shut you into a cabin, and there you'll stay!"

Noakes turned deferentially to the millionaire, who now stood beside the two men.

"You give 'em too soft a living," he declared. "Excuse me saying it, sir, but you're too good, it looks to me, and too gentle!"

"Right!" snapped Markin. "Here they sit, cool as you please, doing nothing but pass the time comfortable, while you, chief, pay a Chink and a Malay to wait on 'em!"

"Like they was decent folks," supplemented Noakes. "Mr. Stone, I sure think you're the kind-heartedest man I ever did see, considering the way you been treated."

"But she's fainted!" This was Houghton. "Or she's dead!"

The girl appeared to be in a serious condition, for her shoulders rose and fell with her heavy respirations. Stone looked down at her.

"Dead?" he said. "That's what she deserves to be. Too bad she isn't! If she's started something, Mr. Markin, by all means give her time to finish the job."

She moaned.

"You're glad to find me lying here, suffering!" she said in a weak voice.

"I am!"

"The living dead! To see me, broken and almost blind—I suppose for you it's a dream come true, isn't it?"

"If I'd given you what you deserved, I'd have had you whipped within an inch of your life. I'd have spoiled the looks that your admirers made so much of!"

The fingers hanging at Stone's sides alternately straightened and clenched, working like the fingers of a man who yearns to tear and strangle. The girl moved feebly.

"You want to kill me! Oh, if you could only find it in your heart to have a little pity on me! Haven't you punished me enough for something I never did? Won't you let me go free? Give me a chance for my life! Don't go away and leave me here to die alone in this terrible place!"

Stone gave a short laugh.

"Alone?" he asked ironically. "Why, my dear, you're not alone. Didn't I leave a very handsome *Lothario* here with you? And I hear he's feeling quite well, as usual. Surely you're not complaining about being *alone!* Didn't you want Mr. Houghton all to yourself? Wasn't that why you were going to Hongkong? Of course it was! And now you don't want to stay here with him. Why, that's an awful slight to the gentleman!"

Noakes laughed in loud appreciation.

"Have mercy!" she pleaded. "Have a little mercy!"

"I must have a look at your dungeon mate," went on Stone, facetiously. "Where is that excellent person?"

"Don't go!" she begged. "Don't refuse to hear me!"

Noakes glowered down at her.

"Stop botherin' Mr. Stone!" he commanded roughly. "You that spent his money like it was water, and had the whole town of Manila laughing at him!"

"Not quite so bad as that," corrected Stone. "Manila is mourning the lady, you know. As for me, I'm a popular widower."

"I'd let her stay a few years more," went on Noakes. "Why, this ain't a jail, boss! This is a darned house boat!"

"You're right, my man!"

As he turned about, Weatherbee noted, even in the stress of the moment, that the lips of the millionaire were screwed into a cruel smile. His eyes were half shut, too. Weatherbee also noted how trimly elegant was this aged husband whom Ellice Loring had called "our master jailer." His silk shirt had narrow stripes. He picked at a bow tie of soft black silk.

"Crafty!" was Weatherbee's silent appraisal of the millionaire. "Vain — unscrupulous—suspicious!"

"Where's a light?" Stone demanded. "I want to get a look at our fascinating gentleman on the other side."

"Here, sir!"

Noakes offered the flash light. The morning sun had not yet penetrated the outside walls of greenery in sufficient force to have any appreciable effect on the painted ports.

The millionaire took the tube, pressed the button, and swung the round, yellow spot of light up and in a half circle, as if making a quick examination of the dining saloon.

"Arranged very cleverly, Mr. Markin," he declared. "*Very* cleverly! I congratulate you!"

"Thanks, chief."

"Couldn't have done better if I had superintended the business myself!"

He pointed the electric flash straight before him. The light fell full upon Weatherbee's face.

Since Stone had come into the dining saloon, Weatherbee had not spoken; and Stone, now suddenly finding himself face to face with the stranger, stood for a long moment, studying him keenly.

In that time, some curious reflections went through Weatherbee's brain. In fact, it was as if two brains were functioning in his head at the same time. He did not forget what there was to do. He was fully conscious of Stone's position, of Markin's, and of the mate's. He was also taking the measure of the millionaire.

Weatherbee was a good judge of men; and he saw before him a sample of that particular type of man which supplies the white-settled portions of the world with fake religionists, with "doctors" who claim to have a new cure for every human ill, and with discoverers of weird "philosophies" guaranteed to remake civilization—in short, the type that is the born fakir.

"That eye of his caused all the trouble," Weatherbee thought. "I've seen that very brand of egotistical charlatan going around the small towns and mesmerizing everybody. No wonder the poor girl got into his power—her mother, too! Here's just the man to think up a diabolical scheme. He's certainly a first-class snake!"

The skin around Stone's partly shut eyes doubled its crinkles, and a lurking smile on his gray-fringed mouth grew to a broad, pleased grin.

"Is this the new birdling in the ungilded cage?" he inquired, with the air of a man who has delivered himself of a witticism.

Weatherbee returned a mocking bow. It angered Stone. He turned on Markin.

"I can't understand how this man came to be aboard the Lillebonne!" he barked. "Confound that Blodgett, anyhow—drunk all the time! I've told him, over and over again, *never* to take on *any* man without my personal approval!"

"I fixed it by locking him up," Markin bragged.

The boast only angered Stone more; and what Weatherbee was expecting happened.

"But you're doing the same thing yourself!" the millionaire charged.

"What do you mean, chief?"

"I mean letting a man I don't know come aboard here!"

Facing Noakes, and indicating him, Stone's back was close to the wire partition on Weatherbee's side.

"Chief!" Markin was thoroughly roused to his sense of personal injury. "You fixed that yourself!"

"I?"

"That letter you sent—the letter you give Blodgett for me! It said this man—"

He swung a plump hand toward Noakes.

"What letter? What are you talking about? I sent no letter, either to you or to Blodgett!"

A moment of silent and breathless questioning—the kind of a tense moment that precedes storm and chaos. Stone stared at Markin. Markin stared at Stone. Both stood as still as wooden images.

From the galley came sounds that told of breakfast activities on the part of the servants, who were gabbling cheerfully in their pidgin English.

Then, as Markin, snorting and grumbling

under his breath, rammed his hands into both trouser pockets, searching for the disputed document, another expected thing happened.

"Grab him!" Weatherbee ordered.

Thrusting all his fingers through the interlacing wire of the partition, he seized Stone by the two collars of his shirt and coat. Noakes, with a deep intake of breath, flung himself on Markin and bore him to the deck. Ellice Loring scrambled to her feet.

Two desperate struggles ensued.

Cursing and shrieking, Stone dropped the flash light and tried with all his strength to pull himself out of Weatherbee's grasp—which, as the wires of the partition were a part of it, was none too secure. His hat fell off, disclosing a bald head.

The contest between Noakes and Markin was still fiercer. Neither spoke as they swayed and bent, for Markin had fought to his feet again, and steadily drew Noakes in the direction of the galley door. Heavily built as he was, he succeeded in keeping the slighter body of Noakes between himself and Houghton, so that the latter was unable to wound or even to intimidate him.

This for ten seconds or more. Then, with a bellow, Markin freed himself, and, gasping and dodging, stumbled his way to the end of the passage, drawing a weapon as he went. In the brief moment that he was exposed to the fire of the other two men, their shots rang out, and his answered, sending three bullets whistling through the saloon, and filling the air with thick smoke.

The galley door was splintered by Houghton's bullet, while the lead from the mate's pistol flattened against an angle iron with a musical *ping*. Markin's missile hit a wire above Houghton's head, glanced, and lost itself in the dark at the foot of the stairs.

Then Markin was gone, whanging the door at his back, and yelling directions to the Chinese and Dukun, whose wild scampering could be heard. Noakes, pocketing his pistol, took Stone in hand, holding him as easily as he might have held a fifteen-year-old boy.

"Keep still, you old scamp!" commanded the mate.

He jerked Stone to his feet, pushed him toward the door just shut by Markin, and held him against it, making him a defensive barrier against any further bullets from that direction.

Stone shook inside the gray suit, and his goatee trembled with his under lip.

"What are you trying to do with me?" he blubbered. "What does this mean?"

"Mr. Weatherbee," said Noakes, "you better answer him. It's you that's got the combination."

Weatherbee, leaving Houghton to watch in the direction of the stairs, moved along the partition until he was close to the new prisoner.

"Mr. Stone," he explained, "what this means is very simple. We intend to free two people whom you have treated outrageously—innocent people. To do that, we must have control of the ship. We have that, because we're all armed—and, old moneybags, we'll hold you to make sure of our own safety!"

XIII

His thin frame thrust against the door of the galley passage, Stone continued to whimper and twist, like a small boy about to be caned. In that light, his face wore a greenish hue. His milky blue eyes roved. His goatee jerked as his chin twitched.

"You—you can't mean—are you men going to kill me?"

Noakes was binding the millionaire's wrists with a bit of rope. He guffawed.

"We'll leave that question to the lady," he answered, and turned an eye, in which humor twinkled, on Ellice Loring, standing close by, silent, self-contained, but pallid with excitement.

"Lady," said the mate, "had I better croak this old devil? If I don't, he'll live to be eighty, and you'll be tied to the old guy forever. When he's dead, though, you're free, and the richest widow on this side of the globe. And, lady, I'd just as soon kill him as a fly. I could do it without turning one bleached hair."

"Stop your foolishness!" laughed Weatherbee. "Where are the keys? We've got to get outside this wire."

Noakes was on his knees now, fettering Stone's ankles with a temporary hobble.

"No keys," he replied; "but here's files." He poked several rasps through the partition. "Honest, Mr. Weatherbee," he chuckled, "I thought you'd never say when I was to jump on our fat friend. You sure had me sweating!"

From the galley were coming no sounds either of movement or voices; but Markin could be heard bawling angrily at Blodgett, as if rousing him from his drunken stupor to action and a sense of the seriousness of things.

Weatherbee, his pistols handy, was filing like mad at a heavy strand of wire.

"I had to wait," he explained, "until the old gentleman was so close that I could get hold of him. Also, I wanted to hear his views—whether he intended to act like a human being or not."

"I have an undoubted right to discipline my own wife!" Stone spluttered. "Her staying here has never been anything but temporary!"

"Dear, kind old gentleman!" retorted Weatherbee. "Do you call a year and a half temporary?"

The millionaire was now secure, and Noakes had his pistols in hand again.

"I'll keep watch on Kum Lee's sliding windows at the back here," he said. "Seems to me we might get picked off through one of 'em."

"Good!" agreed Weatherbee. "Miss Loring, please go at once and put on something dark. As you're dressed now, you're a regular target."

As she turned to carry out this judicious suggestion, Stone broke out into a shrill cackling.

"Miss Loring!" he mocked. "So she's miss here, is she? Lawyer Houghton's got her divorce, eh? She's—"

"That 'll do, sir," Weatherbee interrupted. Filing in a straight, perpendicular line, he was working at a fourth wire. "You'll keep still, or we'll gag you. In this temperature you won't find a gag pleasant—especially later on, when the sun's up, and more especially as we don't intend to spare you any of our small supply of drinking water."

"Better change into black duds yourself, Mr. Weatherbee," cautioned Noakes. "Like you are, you ain't such a snide mark."

Houghton, too, was in white.

The filing made a loud creaking. Weatherbee stopped it, and turned a face wet with perspiration toward the figure seated at the far end of the long table. Houghton was watching the stairs intently. Also, he was mumbling to himself; and by the shaking of his shoulders Weatherbee knew that the elder man was silently laughing.

"Too much strain!" Weatherbee thought sadly.

He heard a movement from outside. He dropped the file.

"What became of Stone's gig?" he asked Noakes.

"The yacht's skipper went back with it, but it's to come here again for Stone after sunset."

Pistols ready, Weatherbee darted to a port, and was just in time to see the moving stern of the Lillebonne's longboat. He fired once—twice—a third time. The boat rocked madly and retreated out of range.

"Markin," Weatherbee warned, "the minute you leave this ship to go for help, your employer will get a couple of lead pills where they'll do the most good! The same thing will happen the second anybody arrives from either the Lillebonne or the yacht. We mean business!"

"Aw, go on!" was the growling retort.

"Send Dukun to us with breakfast for five, and no nonsense!"

"Dukun skipped out."

"Where's Kum Lee?"

"Went with him."

"Why didn't the guard on the bamboo bridge stop 'em?"

"I dunno," was the sulky reply.

"One thing more," Weatherbee went on. "This old bird of a Stone is *our* insurance. To collect from him what you've earned by doing his dirty work, you've got to have him come out of this saloon alive. If Stone dies, you lose the reward of your faithful service."

Evidently Markin was still at water level—either standing in the prow of the longboat, or holding to the bottom of the ladder, for Weatherbee could hear his answer plainly.

"You let the chief go," he ordered gruffly, "or I'll let the Tai-Lan blow up!"

Weatherbee laughed.

"You will, eh? Go ahead and do it! This old rascal and the four of us will go to glory together!"

As Markin could be heard thumping his way upward once more, Weatherbee left the port. He stopped beside Houghton for a moment.

"Tired?" he asked.

"Not a bit of it!" was the hearty response. "Never felt better in all my life. Just praying that Markin or Blodgett will give me a chance by exposing themselves on yonder staircase!"

He swayed with mirth.

(*To be concluded in the February number of* MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE)

Colonel Cash, A. H. G.

A FRIEND OF THE HUMAN RACE HAS SOME SURPRISING ADVENTURES IN THE TEXAS OIL FIELDS

By Olive McClintic Johnson

THE day had something to do with it. Colonel Cassius Clay Patterson always said so. Stern materialists to the contrary, so conservative and sedate a figure in the legal world as Colonel " Cash " Patterson never would have gone to seek his fortune in the oil fields on any other day than Friday, the 13th.

He reached his office early that morning. He unlocked the door, gathered up the few letters and circulars that lay on the floor just inside, and carefully locked the door again. It would never do to allow his neighbors in the dingy building to see him at his janitoring.

He swept and dusted carelessly that morning. His usual meticulous regard for corners and out-of-the-way places was forgotten. Affairs weighed heavily upon him. The problems of life troubled him.

It was strange, too. The colonel had helped so many others to fortune, it seemed that a modicum of ease and riches would have accrued to him in his old age.

With one of those swift retrospective glances that reveal a half century in a twinkling, he reviewed a past full of achievement and honor. He had served his State in the Legislature, long and well. It had cost more than it ever paid in dollars and cents, but the record was a proud one.

In his town, old and aristocratic Tyler, where he and the madam had come on their wedding journey, he was considered a leading citizen. He had fostered the town, and had cared for it and its people, as if he were some kindly feudal lord ruling and improving his demesne.

No beggar ever left his house unfed, and he was an easy mark for book agents and all such loquacious, persuasive gentry. The poor knew upon whom to call when in distress. He visited the sick, and the widow and orphan rose up to call him blessed. He was a graduate of the University of Human Kindness, and thereby entitled to wear after his name the honorary degree of A. H. G. — *amicus humani generis,* a friend of the human race.

Strange that such a man should set his eyes upon the fleshpots of the oil fields! But the colonel was harassed by debt. Creditors assailed him with their importunities. He had nothing with which to appease the butcher or the baker.

His temporal affairs had proceeded with increasing parlousness since the passing of his wife. The madam had known how to guide his ability into effectual lines. All would have been so different if she—and Stephen—had lived!

The colonel had married late in life, and there were years between his first-born and his last-born. Laura, the elder of his children, was a wraith of a woman, a helpless cripple. He loved her as one loves a poem, a dream, or some lovely but unreal object of affection; but Stephen warmed all the fibers of his heart.

Stephen was life, energy, healing. He was the madam incarnate. The colonel adored his boy, his glorious man child, upon whom he was already beginning to lean when the war came, commandeering human props and crutches and commanding feeble old men to stand alone. Stephen had gone to France in command of an infantry battalion, and had not come home.

In a deep abstraction Colonel Cash brushed the morning's sweepings upon a paper and thrust them into the stove. He put away the broom and duster, and turned to his desk.

His eyes fell upon the calendar. He had changed it the last thing before leaving the day before. Friday, the 13th!

The unusual combination held him; or perhaps it was the jinx of the combination —the jinx which delights in causing mortals to walk under ladders, sends others hurtling into hundred-dollar street accidents to rescue five-dollar hats, and impels the remainder to buy mining stock. Something about Friday, the 13th, sent Colonel Cash Patterson to the oil fields.

He turned to the closet for his hat and coat. A swift decision was rare to Colonel Cash. Perhaps this was why he hurried. He wanted to start before he changed his mind.

Outside, he met Jimmy Cook, son of the town derelict, who would undoubtedly have followed in his father's unstable way had it not been for the kindly interest of Colonel Cash. Jimmy had shown his appreciation by deciding to become a lawyer. He had come to return two books to the colonel's library, and to obtain two others. Colonel Cash wondered if the youth really studied the legal tomes, or if they were used merely for door props in the Cook family.

A characteristic thought seized him. It would help the youth to learn what responsibilities mean.

"I say, James," he began in his old-fashioned, dignified manner, "I am obliged to be away for some time. How would you like to keep my office? It would be a quiet, convenient place to pursue your studies, and you could forward my mail and look after the small affairs of the office in my absence."

The boy's freckled face lighted with smiles.

"Bully, Colonel Cash!" said Jimmy. "I'd like that fine!"

"Very well, my son—here is the key."

And before the astonished Jimmy could grasp the situation, the colonel was gone.

Laura viewed her father's decision with her usual indifference.

"So you've turned Argonaut, father? Who would have thought it?" she queried in her delicate, tired voice. "Hand me my aconite, Aunt Jinny."

This was the extent of her comment; but Aunt Jinny, the colored factotum, was loud in her protests.

"'Fo' Gawd, if de cunnel ain' losin' his min'!" she began in querulous tones. "Him a gwine out dar whar dey ain' no proppeh cookin' ner nuttin'! Dat ain' no place fo' quality. Who gwine take keer o' him, I like to know?"

"I'll get along all right," reassured Colonel Cash, as he followed her into the kitchen, hoping for at least a crumb of encouragement. "Ranger is quite a modern city, I am told."

"Is you got any money?" suddenly demanded Aunt Jinny, with the license accorded her long and faithful servitude.

Colonel Cash frowned at the direct interrogation of his colored retainer.

"Certainly," he replied with dignity.

"How much is you got?" insisted Aunt Jinny suspiciously.

"Oh, twenty—ten dollars."

The colonel's airy manner was far from reassuring.

"Hit ain' enough," grumbled Aunt Jinny. "You wait!"

She lumbered outside to her small cabin, mumbling to herself.

"Now, really, Aunt Jinny, I have plenty money—plenty!" Colonel Cash declared, as she returned bearing an old snuff bottle filled with pennies, dimes, and quarters—the savings of years, which she had carefully hoarded as a funeral fund.

"Hit may be plenty, but hit ain' sufficient," was her only reply, as she thrust the money into his hands.

"Why—why, this is your burial money, isn't it?" he questioned.

Aunt Jinny turned away with a contemptuous shrug.

"I ain' studyin' 'bout no buryin'. We's got to live, ain't we?"

So on Friday, the 13th, Colonel Cash, A. H. G., past threescore and ten, and unlearned in even the simplest rules of the intricate oil game, set out to seek his fortune in the multitudinous life of the oil fields.

II

RANGER was an absolute puzzle to the colonel. His quiet dignity was shocked by the noise, the makeshifts, the ballyhoo. He never would understand the ruck and rush of the boom town and its swarming, incoherent population.

If the men wore flannel shirts—as was necessary, doubtless, considering the rough work at hand—why did they decorate them with diamonds? And yonder female passing in an expensive automobile, wearing a handsome fur coat, with a sunbonnet and a snuff stick! Of course she was a woman, and therefore the colonel must remove his hat and hold it in his hand until she passed;

but he couldn't help wishing that she had been equally punctilious regarding her snuff stick.

At breakfast, his first morning in the flimsy, cardboard hotel, he made a friend. It was the way of Colonel Cash to make friends, instead of money.

"Daughter," he remarked to the flushed waitress, as she heaped a Pelion of soiled dishes upon a similar Ossa, and lifted the groaning platter to her trembling shoulder, "you are undertaking too heavy a load."

The exasperated girl turned to blast the speaker with withering scorn. These ever verdant coal-oil johnnies must be suppressed constantly.

"What the—"

One glance at the colonel's solicitous face arrested the objurgation. Here was no philanderer, but a kind-hearted old man. Her tone changed.

"Sure, pop," she acquiesced with a grin; "but you see the bus boy quit, and the boss told us girls we'd just have to snake the empties out the best way we could."

"Pshaw! No man has the right to inflict such—"

"'Tain't a man—it's a lady," punctiliously corrected the little pieface.

"Nevertheless, I cannot permit it," continued the colonel, rising. "A woman," he went on, gently relieving her of the heavy tray, and lifting it to his own shoulder, "is a delicate creature at best, and so constituted that lifting is not only depressing, but positively injurious, to her sensitive organism."

He had reached the kitchen door with his burden, the astonished waitress trailing weakly behind. He pushed the door open and rested the heavy tray on the scullery table.

"So, my dear," he smiled, patting her shoulder, "never lift heavy burdens. Leave them for the men!"

"Gawd!" muttered Mame, looking after the colonel's retreating form with something warm and tender clutching at her heart. "He don't belong to the oil fields. I got to look after that old gent!"

Colonel Cash watched the swirling maelstrom of the oil fields a whole week before a single ripple reached the backwaters of his own existence. Then it was only a pebble cast into the pool; but pebbles sometimes start concentric circles which widen into waves of moment, and it was so with Colonel Cash.

He was negotiating the precarious crossing at the corner of Main and Marston Streets when a voice hailed him. Turning, he recognized Hez Bowers, who years before had lived in Tyler.

"Where in the world did you come from, colonel?" greeted Bowers. "Don't Ranger beat all? If you just wait long enough, you meet up with the world and his wife. I'm mighty glad to see you, sure!" Hez went on confidingly. "I'm closing a little deal, and I'd like to get you to fix the papers."

"Certainly," replied Colonel Cash, "if I can be of any assistance—"

"Well, you sure can! I've got a section of land, out West, that's so pore you can't hardly raise an umbrella on it, and I'm trading half of it to a fellow for a ten-acre oil lease here. Wait a minute. Come here, Sammons!"

A dejected-looking individual separated himself from a group, and approached.

"Meet my friend, Judge Patterson," introduced Bowers. "If you have your abstract, the judge 'll look it over and fix up the deeds."

The man produced a worn and greasy roll of papers.

"I'll take it to my room at the hotel, and give you an opinion at once," said the colonel.

"And I'll be up directly and get it," answered Bowers. He drew Colonel Cash to one side and whispered: "Say, colonel, make out the deed for the whole darned section. Sammons can't read, and it's a good chance to get rid of it all!"

"Yes — er — that is, exactly," returned the colonel, amazed at his friend's surprising proposal.

Bowers went on, and the colonel returned to the hotel. He wondered how he could make Bowers's final instruction coincide with his own favorite maxim from Seneca:

> The greatest man is he who chooses right with invincible determination.

Still, there couldn't be anything so very wrong in giving a man *double* the amount he bargained for.

He was deep in the intricacies of the abstract of title when Bowers, with Sammons, knocked at the door. The colonel had drawn the deed as instructed, giving the new owner the entire section; but he felt that he must in all conscience apprise Sammons of it.

"I ain't carin', specially," returned the drooping Sammons. "I reckon I'll allers be land poor. I tell you what I'll do—I'll let it stand if Bowers 'll take another ten acres I got here."

Bowers looked up interestedly.

"It's a track o' land I've had a long time," continued Sammons. "I located it on a land certificate that I traded a Mexican an old pair o' pants for. It ain't no account," he went on frankly. "Nothin' but dry holes in that section; but they've got it assessed as oil land, and the taxes are eatin' me plumb up."

"I don't want to take it," said Bowers emphatically.

Suddenly Colonel Cash saw a way out of the difficulty. He would take the despised ten-acre tract for his fee. It was a solution that would relieve both parties, for he divined that neither had any money.

His proposal met with instant favor and the transaction was completed.

III

The next morning Colonel Cash paused at a huge wall map, which hung in the hotel lobby, to look up the exact location of his holdings. Two men were tracing the map with animated fingers. He waited politely for them to finish.

"I tell you, Jones," said one, "we got to have more acreage. It ain't safe to start on what we got. The minute folks get wind of that well, the acreage 'll jump sky high!"

"Yeah, that's so," admitted the other man.

"We got to have more," repeated the first speaker, "or the scheme's blowed up. We got to have it darn quick, too. Shake a leg and see what you can pick up."

"Nothing doing, Jamieson," replied Jones. "You couldn't pry another acre loose with a crowbar."

Jamieson groaned and shook his head.

The A. H. G. had overheard.

"Gentlemen," he inserted, "excuse me if I am intruding, but I couldn't help overhearing and observing your distress. I have a small tract of land located somewhere in the outer purlieus of this village. If it would be of any assistance to you, I should be only too glad to place it at your disposal."

"Great Tom!" exclaimed Jones, in a breathless undertone. "Just listen at the language!"

This was evidently a new kind of con game. He regarded the colonel with undisguised pleasure; but his partner was quick to realize the significance of the unusual offer.

"Just where is your land located?" Jamieson asked, in the even tones of the born gambler.

Colonel Cash produced his deed.

"I was waiting to ascertain that for myself as soon as you finished with the map. H-m! Here it is—Block 3, Section 208. Yes, here, near—"

"Gosh!" exclaimed Jones, goggle-eyed with surprise. "It's within a mile of the well!" he whispered.

"What do you want for it?" asked the other, with suppressed eagerness.

"Why, really, I have not put a price on it," returned the colonel calmly. "What is it worth?"

Although done unconsciously, he could scarcely have made a more ingenious reply.

"Do you own it in fee, or just the lease?" countered the other.

"Why, let me see." The colonel readjusted his glasses. "The deed will state. I have only just acquired it, and I neglected to notice."

Jones looked at him in rapt approbation. This bewhiskered old man was a smooth artist!

Colonel Cash unfolded the deed.

"Yes, here it is," he said, reading it calmly. "This is the conveyance of a fee simple title."

Jamieson scratched his head.

"We couldn't afford to buy anything but the mineral rights. What 'll you take?"

"You know oil values better than I," innocently returned the colonel.

Jones again accorded him an admiring glance. This funny old jollier was *there* when it came to dickering!

"Start low," he cautioned his partner.

"Nothing doing," Jamieson returned, out of the corner of his mouth. "He's wise!"

"Yeah—I reckon you're right."

"How would three hundred dollars suit you?" ventured Jamieson, looking at the colonel.

"Perfectly, if you think the lease is worth so much to you."

The enthusiasm of Jones burst all bounds.

"Oh, you foxy grandpa!" he shouted, clapping the colonel on the back. "If I had your phiz and your line o' talk, I could skin this crooked oil game from hell to breakfast!"

The ugly duckling lease now performed unbelievable and bewildering gyrations. Jones and Jamieson let it become known that a well was to be brought in in Block 3. In reality, they believed the well to be a failure, and this was their final coup to sell their surrounding acreage. Everybody scrambled to procure leases around the potential gusher. The colonel's lease changed hands several times, at increasing figures, and seemed to be poised for a further skyward flight.

Colonel Cash was unaware of the excitement, but the news came to Sammons with disconcerting directness. He paused in his frantic rush up Main Street to draw the colonel from a crowd that was congregating at the Austin Street corner, to listen to the harangue of a street preacher.

" Say, judge, you want to get rid of that land I let you have yesterday?" he anxiously inquired.

The colonel shook his head abstractedly. His interest was centered on the female companion of the long-haired preacher.

She wore a flaming scarlet dress, and stood blowing a brass horn, to attract an audience for her associate. It was unwomanly, thought Colonel Cash. He was almost persuaded to remonstrate with her. He would have done so, and would gallantly have offered to take her place, had he been able to blow the trumpet; but Colonel Cassius Clay Patterson was no trumpeter. The only instrument upon which he was proficient was the violin.

Perhaps, he thought, she would agree to the substitution of his violin for her horn; but he suddenly remembered that he had not brought his violin to the oil fields with him. Really, it was too bad!

Regretfully he turned to his interlocutor, who was impatiently jabbing him in the midriff.

" I sold the lease for three hundred dollars this morning," said the colonel quietly.

" Ain't that hell?" sputtered Sammons. " I could 'a' got two thousand for it, easy. It's just my luck. Here I am sweatin' to make a livin', herdin' cattle and runnin' a go-devil, and I've plumb give away a little fortune!"

Colonel Cash, A. H. G., felt very sorry, not for his own loss, but for Sammons's disappointment. He insisted upon deeding back to the man the title to the land, which would convey the owner's one-eighth royalty on oil taken from it. This generosity the graceless Sammons had not the strength to decline.

IV

Mame had not forgotten her determination to look after the old " gent." At supper that night she seated him at a table with two prosperous-looking new arrivals. They talked of the lease market, and Colonel Cash could not help observing that they were eager to invest.

" Perhaps I can assist you," he ventured finally. " I transferred a ten-acre lease today which is said to be very promising."

The strangers listened appreciatively.

Colonel Cash was a masterly speaker. In his prime he had been renowned as one of the greatest jury lawyers in all Texas. He elaborated the merits of the lease, and before the meal was over he sold it, short, for five thousand dollars.

He knew that he could buy it for three thousand, and a few minutes later he had done so. Then, with two thousand dollars in his pocket, Colonel Cash took Mame to the movies.

When they returned to the hotel, the colonel discovered that his capitalistic acquaintances had disposed of the lease for seventy-five hundred dollars, and that it was now in the hands of a broker who had posted it on the lobby bulletin for ten thousand!

There was no regret in the colonel's mind, however. The remarkable tract, which he had never seen, had that day netted him twenty-three hundred dollars. Besides, he had helped to brighten the evening for the little blond servitor. His mission was good to humanity *in excelsis,* and Colonel Cash went to bed happy.

But Sunday was a trying day. He had been mysteriously inoculated with the oil-field virus. Try as hard as he would to be pious, he could not dismiss the world entirely from his mind.

At church, fugitive thoughts of the wonderful lease interrupted his devotions. It attracted him strangely. He had no desire to seek other investments more in keeping with his limited means. Before he slept, he determined to take an option on the alluring lease, trusting to fortune for the remaining funds with which to exercise the option.

The next day was a legal holiday, and the banks were closed. It was probably for this reason that he was granted a twenty-four-hour option in exchange for his two thousand dollars. It was certainly for this reason that he did not also similarly expend his three hundred, for he had deposited it in a bank on Saturday. He burned with an elation such as he had not felt in months.

" There you are, cap," said the broker, handing him the option. " Eight thousand dollars, and the lease is yours. She's a humdinger!"

Eight thousand dollars! Colonel Cash came back to earth with a suddenness. How was he to acquire such a sum? Why, there wasn't that much money in the world—certainly not in the world of Colonel Cash. Colonel Cash! Even his name was a misnomer.

" Eight thousand dollars," he repeated mechanically. " Eight thousand dollars, I never—"

" Sure!" said Barstow crisply. " Eight thousand at eight o'clock in the morning!"

The hard, metallic tones of the broker produced a strange revulsion. The old man looked at the lease option in his hand. It was a hideous thing. His elation was gone. He had been a reckless, headlong fool!

He suddenly felt very old and helpless. He bowed his fine, white head. Oh, if only the madam were here, or Stephen! Never had he so much needed some one upon whom to lean. He turned and wandered blindly from the hotel.

He must have walked miles, for when he came to himself he had reached the country. He came upon a spot where the warm spring sun had intrigued the early grass blades, and he flung himself upon it with glad abandon. At his feet rolled the river, its banks already glorified by the pink of the redbud and the white of the haw blossoms. Beyond stretched the Eastland road with its double file of derricks, marching toward the horizon.

In his enjoyment of the scene Colonel Cash almost forgot the troublesome business that had driven him from the town. He closed his eyes drowsily, and was sinking into a pleasant somnolence, when an unfamiliar sound brought him to his feet. It was the agonized shriek of a woman.

Running in the direction of the sound, he broke through a mass of vegetation and came upon a huddle of Mexican huts. A group of dazed children and a frantic woman bent over the prostrate form of a boy. A broken bough from the tree overhead told the tale.

Colonel Cash hurried forward and drew a brandy flask from his pocket. He knelt and applied it to the boy's pale lips. As the color came back into the swarthy cheeks, and the woman became more coherent, he asked:

" Have you sent for a doctor?"

The woman shook her head uncomprehendingly.

" Doctor — *medico*," repeated Colonel Cash.

He had a smattering of Spanish, having been one of those irreconcilable young spirits who betook themselves to Mexico following the final defeat of the Lost Cause. In fact, it was there that he had acquired his title of colonel—a " Tampico colonel," but that is another story.

" No tengo dinero," the woman answered sadly.

Colonel Cash had no money, either. He sighed, and turned to the boy. He had learned something of the rudiments of surgery in the last dark days of the Confederacy, and he set to work to put his fragmentary knowledge into practice.

Very gently he reset the broken arm. His work was not very deft, but a woman could not have been gentler in her ministrations. Marcia and Pedro, the boy's parents, regarded him with doglike devotion.

It was twilight when he turned his face back toward the town. Functioning in his proper rôle of *amicus humani generis*, he had forgotten the troubles of the morning. The poor aliens' *" Gracias, gracias!"* rang in his ears, causing his heart to glow. Colonel Cash was returning like an army with banners.

He bared his head to the evening breeze, and sang his favorite verse from the loved poet of the Southland:

" My soul is like the oar that momently
  Dies in a desperate stress beneath the wave,
Then glitters out again and sweeps the sea;
  Each second I'm newborn from some new grave!"

He found the hotel in turmoil. As the noise and confusion beat upon his ears, the troubles of the morning returned. The song died on his lips, and his cheerfulness slipped from him like a garment.

He attempted to make his way unobserved to the stairs, but somebody grabbed his arm. He turned, and saw the flushed face of Barstow.

" Say, cap, I've been looking for you all day! Say, how'd you like to have your money back for that option?"

Colonel Cash passed a weary hand over his tired brow. The words made slight impression upon him.

" I'm very tired," he said apologetically.

" But would you?" insisted the man.

" Wait till morning," returned the colonel, mounting the stairs.

Soon after he reached his room, there was a knock at the door. It was Mame, bearing a covered plate.

" Missed you at supper, pop, and I bet you haven't ate a bite, so I brought you a glass of milk and a sandwich."

This was meat in due season to the colonel. He led her into the room and relieved her of the plate.

" That was very thoughtful of you, daughter, but really—"

" Don't say a word," she commanded. " Set right down and eat. You look awful tired."

As he complied, Mame found a chair and made conversation.

" We've had an awful time to-day! They brought in a new gusher, and everybody's gone crazy. The boarders are all bughouse. They don't know whether they're eating ice cream or soy beans, and don't care. It's a curious world, ain't it? Everybody's after the coin!"

" It seems so, indeed," returned the colonel, between bites. " It is unfortunate, for there are so many worthier interests."

Mame looked at him quizzically.

" How'd you happen to come to the oil fields, pop?"

Refreshed by her interest as much as by the food, the colonel became almost enthusiastic in the description of his home. He told Mame of the foolishness of Aunt Jinny until she nearly choked with laughter; but when he spoke of his beautiful, helpless daughter the girl's eyes grew misty. Colonel Cash was genuinely touched by her sympathy.

" There, there, daughter! I am going back as soon as I have made a fortune for them, and we shall all be very happy."

" How much you cleaned up already?" she demanded suddenly.

He told her of the option, and of the broker's amazing offer.

" I was feeling rather depressed, but that makes it all right, and to-morrow I shall have twenty-three hundred dollars."

" It's a miracle!" she exclaimed. " Say, you got to go home. You couldn't do it again in a hundred years, and you could lose it in five minutes." She paused to reflect. " I wonder if Barstow was stringing you, pop! I'll sic Charlie on him the first thing in the morning."

She rose to go.

" Charles?" pursued the colonel.

" My steady, you know." Mame smiled happily. " He says he's awful jealous of you. Him and I was going to a show to-night, but we couldn't, on account of the well comin' in. Charlie's an oil scout, and his boss wired him to get some leases or die a tryin'."

There came a knock at the door.

" I bet that's him now!" said Mame, looking very conscious.

It was. Charles had come to announce that they might as well go to the show, after all, as he had not succeeded in securing any acreage.

" Not a frazzlin' foot!" he declared bitterly, and predicted that what the boss would do to him would be " a plenty."

" Cut it, Chass," directed Mame, " and meet Squire Patterson. He's got a deal on with old Barstow, and I want you to see that Barstow don't go back on his word tomorrow. Maybe you'd better cinch the thing to-night."

" I was just going to suggest," said the colonel, " that I did not definitely close with Barstow, and that perhaps the acreage would suit Charles." He turned to the young man with one of his rare smiles. " I should much prefer to accommodate you and Mamie than Barstow."

" Look at his paper and see what he's got, Chass," ordered Mame, more to please the colonel than anything else.

Charles was already deep in the whereases and wherebys of the colonel's option. Presently he looked up and gave a long, excited whistle.

" What is it?" asked Mame, peering over his shoulder.

Charles recovered his voice.

" Great fishhooks!" he exclaimed. " Why ain't you down in the lobby, squire? You could get your own price for this."

Mame answered for her charge.

" He's tired, Chass," she said.

Charles looked at the colonel curiously.

" Tired? Man, this is no country to be tired in!" His eyes rested on the paper. " What 'll you take for it?"

Again Mame answered for the colonel.

" Barstow offered to give him his money back. You see that he does it, Chass!"

Charles was eloquent with scorn.

" Offered to give him his money back? By ganny, I reckon he would! It's worth fifty thousand dollars if it's worth a—"

But the colonel heard no more. With a gentle sigh he toppled over on the bed. The day had been too much for him. For the first time in his life, he had fainted.

V

Half an hour later, as Mame and Charles tiptoed out, leaving the colonel fully restored and dropping off to sleep, she asked:

" Is that right, Chass, what you said about his land?"

" Course it's right! He's got eight thousand to pay on his option, so I'm going to write him a voucher for forty-two thousand. The boss told me to go as high as five thousand an acre, and when he sees that voucher he'll know I done it." He smiled appreciatively. " Funniest thing, Mame—them guys that own the well are the only ones not making any money. They thought it was a failure, and sold out too quick."

" It's an awful crooked game, Chass! All I want is to get the old gent away from here before some high-jack gets his cash."

" Yeah—I'll put him on the train tomorrow morning."

All would have been well if Charles had carried out his intention, but the morrow brought its own problems, and the matter passed from his mind.

Mame saw the colonel at breakfast, and bade him good-by with a sigh of relief. She thought she was sending him back to Laura and Aunt Jinny with a sufficient competence for their remaining days; but Colonel Cash was not to leave the oil fields that day, or for many days to come.

The news of his sale of the lease at fabulous figures was bruited about the offices and oil exchanges. Soon it reached Jones and Jamieson. They discussed it in the back room of a flimsy office.

" There's something uncanny about the luck of that old geezer," said Jamieson. " He don't know a drill stem from a sucker rod, and here he breezes in and cleans up fifty grand, while we—"

" I ain't so sure he ain't wise," interrupted Jones.

" No—he's as innocent as a baby," averred his partner. " Tell you what a fellow told me the other day. His name was Sammons. He's a hill billy, just moved into town from a run-down farm. He says he owned the land for years, and practically gave it to the old gent. When the play starts on it, he mouths around about his hard luck letting it get away from him; and what you reckon old whiskers does? He deeds him back the owner's royalty! Yes, sir—don't charge him a cent; and Sammons sells the royalty for a young fortune, and moves to town."

" Ought to be something for us in that," said Jones reflectively.

" Yeah, if we could frame it. Grandpop 'll fall for a hard luck story every time."

There was a moment of silence. The partners looked at each other through eyes narrowed like slits. Then an exclamation burst from them simultaneously:

" Hazelton's duster!"

" No-o—that's too thin," objected Jones.

" The thinner the better," declared Jamieson. " Listen! We'll wise up Hazelton and let him swing it. Never do for us to appear. We'll hatch up a hard luck story and sell the old sucker the dry hole for his fifty thousand."

" Oh, momma!" exclaimed Jones, ecstatically pounding his partner on the back.

" Come on—no time to lose," said the other. " Got to find Hazelton."

Jones and Jamieson tore from the shack.

VI

Colonel Cash, A. H. G., descended the hotel steps, baggage in hand. He had accorded an elaborate farewell to each friend in the hotel, and was now on his way to the station, homeward bound. The valuable voucher was in his pocket.

" Leaving, mister?" called a man from the sidewalk. " Let me take you and your baggage to the train in my flivver," he invited. " Get in!"

This was cordiality indeed, coming from a stranger, and the unsuspecting colonel responded readily.

" Lots of time yet," said the man. " Have you seen our city?"

" Only partially."

" I'll take you for a ride. My name's Hazelton."

Some hours later, Hez Bowers came upon the colonel as the old man was entering an oil exchange.

"Colonel!" he exclaimed in surprise. "I heard about your good luck, but they told me at the hotel you had gone back home."

The colonel's face was wreathed in smiles.

"Not yet, Bowers. I found that by staying over I could do an unfortunate gentleman a small service, and, at the same time, materially increase my fortune."

"How's that, judge?"

"The gentleman's name was Hazelton. He—"

Bowers looked up quickly, and a frown overspread his face.

"He seemed to be a clever man, but unfortunate," the colonel went on, unmindful of Bowers's gathering expression of scorn. "He had an uncompleted well, easily worth fifty thousand dollars, but he could not stay to finish it on account of the serious illness of his wife in Georgia, so he offered me the—"

"Damn his nerve!" burst from Bowers.

"No, no!" remonstrated Colonel Cash. "Not at all! It was a pleasure for me to serve him, and, as I said, with some profit to myself. I have no intention of completing the well, of course, but there was no reason why I should not prolong my stay for a few days and sell it for fifty thousand dollars — particularly," added the colonel naïvely, "as it only cost me forty-two."

Dismay overspread the honest countenance of Bowers.

"You gave him forty-two thousand bucks for it?" he blurted.

"Exactly," smiled the colonel, pleased as a child.

Bowers shook his head from side to side.

"Pore innocent baby!"

"Why, why, Bowers? I don't understand you."

"Colonel, they sold you a gold brick. Everybody knows that well's a duster."

A look of bewilderment was on the colonel's face.

"The gentleman gave me his word of honor," he protested.

Bowers could restrain himself no longer.

"Damn them slickers! They ought to go to the pen for this! There ain't no oil there at all," he said to the colonel. "You'll have to unload it on some other sucker."

There was conviction in Bowers's emphatic words. The colonel shook his head uncertainly. His mouth sagged, and his shoulders drooped. Something in the old man's helplessness touched the bluff heart of Bowers.

"Say, come up to my house," he invited, "and stay till you find a buyer."

But Colonel Cash would not make a convenience of a friend. Neither would he defraud his fellow man.

"No, I shall make other arrangements," he said quietly. "If the well is a failure, as you say, I could not afford to sell it."

"You can't afford to keep it!" blurted Bowers.

"Yes—I shall proceed with the drilling."

"Goshamighty!" said Bowers.

Colonel Cash then made two important moves. He instructed the workmen to continue drilling the hopeless well, and he telegraphed Jimmy Cook for his violin. It did not occur to him to draw his three hundred dollars from the bank. That sum would be required to pay the workmen at the end of the week; so he arranged with the hotel for his maintenance, and accordingly, when the violin arrived, he took his place in the hotel orchestra.

I cannot describe the feelings of Mame when her eyes first fell upon him. She swallowed her chewing gum and all but dropped her tray.

"Gawd! If it ain't the old gent! And me just congratulatin' myself on gettin' him safe home! Can you beat it?"

"I could not go," he explained later. "You see, it would throw my men out of work. As I have sufficient funds to continue drilling for a week, I decided to proceed and give them time to look around for other work."

This was all Greek to Mame, so she hit upon the outstanding fact.

"But you a playin' here in the orchestra?" she gasped.

"Oh, this?" He made a deprecatory gesture. "Mrs. McClellan confessed to me, some time ago, that she needed another violin, and, as I have nothing to do while waiting for my well, I—I sent home for my instrument."

"*Your* well? What kind o' well?" demanded Mame suspiciously.

"That is just what I was going to tell you," said the colonel, with a brave show of nonchalance. "I traded the voucher Charles gave me for an oil well."

" G-o-o-d night!" said Mame, rolling her eyes heavenward.

VII

At the end of the week, when the colonel paid his men, he neglected to dismiss them, so they continued. That night, in the hotel lobby, a bibulous " oil maggot," moved to generosity by his spirituous imbibings, generously fed the orchestra.

" Play ' Shilver Shreds Amongsh zhe Golsh," he ordered.

For a moment the orchestra leader was confused, for the desired selection was not in his repertoire; but Colonel Cash rose to the occasion. This had been the madam's favorite of all his pieces. He stood and played it as one inspired.

" Thash g-grand!" sobbed the man. His emotion scorned his previous expression as inadequate. He tendered his purse. " H-here," he said, with a flood of tears, " take it all! Wha's money?"

Thus Colonel Cash was enabled to meet the second week's pay roll. His resources seemed to hold out miraculously. The next week it was Mame and Charles who furnished the funds. Mame proposed it.

" Chass, it 'll break his old heart to have to quit drillin'. Let's stake him to another week!"

" It's throwin' good money after bad," objected the oil scout.

" Sure," agreed Mame; " but still you're goin' to do it, just like when you give him the limit on that option." She looked at Charles with perfect understanding. " You know, as well as me, you could 'a' bought it for ten thousand berries, and you paid him fifty."

" Yeah," groaned Charles. " We could 'a' took the difference and got married. Instead, he's bought this darned well for us to worry over!"

" Well, it has give us all some interest in life," declared Mame. " If he was to hit a gusher, I want you to grab it, Chass, and sell it before he can give it away. Then hand him the money in government bonds." Mame's enthusiasm soared at the thought. " Oh, Chass, if you'll do that, I'll marry you for life!"

" I'll do my darnedest!" said Charles, taking a kiss as a retainer.

The colonel's well did give them a new interest in life. Mrs. McClellan took a week's share in it, then the orchestra and the kitchen and dining room help did likewise. Finally, the workmen caught the spirit, which even extended to the Mexican family of Marcia and Pedro, with the amazing result that the men worked without pay. Marcia boarded them, and Pedro furnished equally necessary rations—oak chunks—to the hungry boiler. Nobody believed in the well, but everybody believed in the colonel.

Then, one day, the well confounded all the prophets by coming in, gushing two hundred barrels an hour. Charles took possession of it immediately, and sold it to his company for a fabulous sum, so that everybody from the colonel to the Mexican family rolled in wealth.

On that same day the colonel received a letter from Jimmy Cook. It read:

> Dear Colonel:
>
> I sent your fiddle. Had an awful time getting it without letting Aunt Jinny know, like you said. I passed the bar exam. Won my first case today. Gee, I was tickled! My client paid me twenty-five dollars. I inclose twelve dollars and fifty cents, your part, as I used your office and books. How'd it suit you for me to stay and help you for half I make? I want to.
>
> Your friend,
> Jimmy.

This pleased the colonel quite as much as the oil well. Also it gave him a distinct nostalgia.

" I must go home," he declared suddenly. " Important business!"

All the hotel family went down to the station to see him off. A burro-drawn cart, with the Mexican family, was parked near by, and the drilling crew lolled in the station doorway. Colonel Cash, violin in one hand and carpetbag in the other, went among these groups with a friendly word for each individual.

When the old man came to Mame and Charles, he paused, and something clutched at his throat. He set down his various impedimenta.

" Daughter," he began, but words failed him. " I think I'll just kiss you!"

He looked at Charles inquiringly, but Mame, without reserve, threw both arms around his neck.

" Sure, squire!" said Charles, with a proud proprietary air. " Go as far as you like!"

The force of Mame's salute dislodged the colonel's hat. Charles stooped to its recovery, meanwhile urging him gently toward the moving train. There was a waving of arms and handkerchiefs. Colonel Cash smiled happily.

"Come to see me when you are married, my children!" he called to Mame and Charles.

"We will! We will!" shrilled the voices of the Mexican children.

Nodding kindly, Colonel Cash, A. H. G., passed into the moving coach. The train glided smoothly away.

"Gee!" said Mame, turning tearful eyes to her lover. "I just love that old gent!"

"Yeah, he sure is a friend to—to—"

Charles had meant to say "lots of people," but the words seemed inadequate. Mame realized his limitation.

"To the human race," she supplied succinctly.

Conway Comes Back

A COUNTERFEITER TURNS ORIGINATOR AND DEFIES THE HOUNDS OF THE LAW

By Harry Varley

RUFUS CONWAY started a business of his own. He had only one real competitor in his line, but that one was a large dealer who claimed an absolute monopoly in the manufacture and distribution of the product.

No law could break this monopoly. In fact, all existing laws guarded the monopolist, and frowned severely upon any who dared trespass on an exclusive prerogative.

Conway was an artist and an engraver. That determined his choice of business. He was a money maker—actually. His products were five-dollar bills.

They commanded the same price on the open market as those sent out by his competitor. As it was an unnecessary formality for him to deposit in any treasury the equivalent value in gold or silver, Conway's sales gave him a rate of profit that can seldom be obtained in these days—except, perhaps, by a purveyor of the absolute necessities of life, such as coal for the household or milk for babies.

It was not all cream, however. For example, it was impossible for him to remain long in any one town. By the very nature of his trade, it was impolitic to employ a large sales force. The product couldn't be advertised. Hence it was Conway's task to be head of sales as well as manager of production. As a matter of fact, it was a close corporation — so close that Conway was the whole company.

His factory was in an upstairs back room in New York, overlooking the East River. The address was not on his business cards, because he had no business cards. Only an old woman, who lived downstairs in the tumble-down house, knew that the Conway plant was upstairs.

Conway called her "mother," but she couldn't have been. She was a bent, wizened, gray-haired hag, with a thin, bony face, in which two brilliant eyes were sunk. She had a heart that was as true as a dog's, although her general disposition was feline.

How could *she* be the mother of Conway? He was the artist type—even to the pale, ascetic face, which might have been a monk's if he had shaved off the soft, silky Vandyke beard. She spoke like the fifth generation of an East Side tenement family; he like a man born in Newcastle-on-Tyne, in the north of England, who has been in America long enough to lose most of his accent, yet not long enough to forget any of his grammar.

How Conway came to know the old woman and to live in her home doesn't concern us. The essential fact is that in this upstairs room were made the famous "Conway fives" that aroused the professional envy of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing of the United States government. These fives brought together several bankers who seriously considered asking a private detective agency to find the man who made them, so that they could pension him under positive contracts to cease his troublesome activities.

The government officials were distraught. Only an expert could distinguish between a " Conway five " and a government or a bank five. Only one expert, the highest in the profession, was able immediately to pronounce a verdict on two fives that were placed before him.

" This," he said with assurance, " is the counterfeit "—and unhesitatingly he pointed out the perfect United States note.

Don't think that in the beginning the government or the bankers referred to " Conway fives " as such. They knew the product, but not the man, until Conway was trapped in Des Moines, Iowa.

It happened because he trusted a woman, talked too much, and permitted the artist in him to get the better of his judgment. The loneliness of his work had made him too susceptible to the charms of female company, personified in the landlady of the rooming house where he was staying. The woman was pretty. She was also affectionate, and on a certain night she cut off one of his brown curls " for a keepsake when you're gone."

Subsequently she explained that she needed money. Conway offered her some of his competitor's manufacture. She refused it. He impelled her to accept by showing how easily and how well he made money.

She took the genuine bills he gave her, and late that night, when Conway slept, she telephoned for the police. They caught Conway napping — or, rather, in a deep sleep—with several hundred samples of his product under the pillow.

When Conway awoke to a realization of his position, he attempted to leave the room by a window exit, whereupon the police, being only six to one, pounded his head with their sticks until it bled profusely. They also opened a wide gash in his cheek.

They allowed Conway to dress—the muzzle of a revolver apparently interesting him less than his necktie—and then they ushered him from the house. Two bulky officers kindly lent their shoulders to support him, for otherwise he might have collapsed at their feet.

The woman who had betrayed Conway stood fearfully in the doorway. He looked straight at her. One side of his mouth twitched, as if it would smile in spite of his pain. Then, suddenly, all the agony of a female Judas was born in her lifting bosom.

Conway took out a handkerchief and wiped the blood from his mouth. He must have remembered the lock of hair she had cut from his head for a keepsake. His voice was very soft:

" Ah, Delilah!"

Stirred by a peculiarly feminine psychology, she threw herself upon the floor and cried, with anguish in her voice:

" Why did you tell me? It's your own fault! You shouldn't have said a word to me!"

Conway stooped. The policemen released the grip of their fingers screwed around his coat collar. He patted the woman's shoulder.

" Don't cry! You were right — I shouldn't have talked."

He lifted himself as nearly erect as his weakened muscles would permit. A terrible change came over his face. It was as if the very texture of his flesh changed and grew hard—as if his face had suddenly become a white-painted iron mask streaked with red. His voice rasped with the sound of a large-toothed file on wood as he spoke again:

" I shouldn't have talked. I won't talk again, and nobody can make me!"

At the strange change in his voice and demeanor, the policemen, who had been men for a minute, became policemen again. They seized him and hurried him across the threshold past the woman who was lying there, still crying in a low voice and saying over and over again:

" It's your own fault! You shouldn't have said a word to me!"

II

PICTURE all the physical tortures of the Spanish Inquisition applied mentally. Imagine Conway's mind being stretched upon an ever widening rack of sleeplessness; being broken upon a wheel of insolence; having small pieces of mental flesh ripped away by red-hot pincers; feeling the naked steel of questions stabbed from the darkness, while his soul shrank in the white flame of a pitiless light.

Think of these things, and formulate your own picture of the third degree examination as given to Conway by men who demanded a confession. They desired to know where he made his five-dollar counterfeits; where he kept his plant; who were his friends and accomplices, and all of his business secrets.

The sessions lasted more than a week of red days and black nights. The experts say that a man deprived of sleep will eventually confess the truth; but the truth is that men driven beyond endurance will confess lies, or anything, for a moment's respite.

Conway was the exception that proves the rule. To their thousands of questions he answered never a word. The most exquisite mental torture could not shake him or break the resolution he had made when he said to his betrayer and to the world:

"I won't talk again, and nobody can make me!"

Finally, they had to surrender to the will of this man. He was duly tried, but if his tongue had been removed he could not have been more silent. It was voluntary dumbness. Even when the judge, struck with the fineness of Conway's features and his betrayal by the woman he would have befriended, pleaded with him to speak in his own defense, he coolly turned his back upon the bench.

So there was nothing to prevent the speedy verdict and the terse words, "Ten years!" which wiped out the name of Rufus Conway and replaced it with "No. 10647," Anamosa State Prison.

III

FIVE years in prison changed the man to a monster. Every human emotion had congealed within him. His heart was hard and cold to life in its every manifestation—not cold with the frailty of ice, which can be broken and splintered by a harder substance, or melted by the sun; not hard with the comparative warmth of metal. It was of frozen steel that would need a white-hot flame to melt it; and in all humanity there was not one sympathetic spark of warmth for Conway—except, perhaps, in the heart of his "mother" of the East Side house in New York. She muttered to herself, each night, her only prayer, in which there was a declaration of faith.

"He'll come back some day! The bulls have got him, but he'll come back!"

Conway had kept the vow he made in the presence of his betrayer. He had not spoken to any one from the time of his arrest. They had tried to break his will in every possible way—hunger, thirst, solitary confinement, gang work on the road and in the fields—but he never flinched.

When hunger was gnawing at his vitals, when his tongue was swollen with thirst, he scratched a wonderful design on a piece of board ripped from his bed. Using the point of a common pin, he incorporated the Statue of Liberty, the American Eagle, and the Stars and Stripes. His art, for the moment, was food, drink, life—as real art should be.

From the first day in prison he rebelled passively against all the rules and discipline of prison routine. Finally he refused to work, and they couldn't make him. A prisoner in a barred cell, yet by virtue of his will he was a king. All the resources of a huge penal institution shattered themselves against his indomitable resistance—iron against steel.

It was not always passive resistance. Once, in the prison yard, before many prisoners who were exercising, a warder thought to make Conway talk by using vile, insulting terms. Conway was deaf as well as dumb until, among the mouthings of the tormentor, there came the word "mother." Conway's thin white fingers closed over the warder's throat and tightened in a grip that never loosened until another warder ran up and beat the convict into insensibility with the butt end of a revolver.

They gave him three months' solitary confinement for that—which was silly. This man, of his own will, was always in solitary confinement—and would have been in a crowd of ten thousand. He had shut himself up within himself, and had closed and locked the door upon the world. Whether he was physically alone or not could make no difference to him.

Two things can happen to a man who chooses to live entirely to himself. If his will eventually breaks, his mind fails with it. Should his will survive, he becomes like a trained animal, or an automaton. The latter phase was the only possibility for Conway. He became like an animal that lived as a man.

Still he ate his rude fare and drank from tin vessels with the manners of a man who knows good eating, and who has drunk from glasses with bubbles rising through their hollow stems. For hours each day, every day in the week, he walked up one side of his cell and down the other, with his shoulder pressing against the wall—walked until he wore a groove shoulder high in the cement down both sides of his cell.

The man was silent, dumb. These grooves screamed out with a fervid eloquence that was silence articulate—a sermon, or, if you choose, a blasphemy in stone.

IV

Five years! And then the miracle!

A new superintendent, Hugh Osgood, had come to the prison. He was walking through the corridors, on his first day, with his wife and his eight-year-old daughter, Norine, showing them the prison. It was a sunny morning.

As the group neared Conway's cell, a warder had thrown open the door to enter on some formal errand. A beam of sunshine shot through the opening, and attracted Norine. She ran ahead before her father or mother could restrain her, and, reaching the open cell door, she stood, dazed, perhaps, by the bright light.

Conway, heedless of the warder's entrance, was making his eternal round. He had walked up the left side of the cell away from the door, had crossed before the barred window, and his shoulder had just sunk into its accustomed groove, when Norine reached the door.

The prisoner stopped as if paralyzed. He saw, framed in a black opening, the face of a child, ineffably beautiful, with the sunlight glorifying her golden curls. Everything that was pure, good, and altogether lovely was manifest in her blue, laughing eyes.

For one agonizing moment his pose was held. Then the iron mask of years dropped suddenly from Conway's face. Hot tears flooded his eyes and melted the steel within him.

Slowly he lifted his hands to the child in a gesture that was invitation, entreaty. And Norine, with the complete understanding of childhood, which is wiser than the wisdom of age, ran to him. He spoke, and his voice, silent for so many years, sounded strangely harsh and mechanical. His tongue labored over pronunciation.

"Who are you? What is your name?"

The warder, realizing that a miracle was happening, slipped to the cell door and out into the passage. By this time Mr. Osgood and his wife had run to the cell, and were calling Norine. Disregarding authority, the warder motioned fiercely for silence.

"For God's sake, leave her there! He is *talking* to her! It's No. 10647."

In a few hurried words he told the story. They looked into the cell. There, under the window, Conway was reverently touching one of Norine's golden curls, while she explained that her mother and she had come here to live, so that daddy could take care of the prison. For five minutes the convict and the girl talked, and then the reaction came.

"You must go now. Will you come and talk to me to-morrow—if you can?"

"Oh, yes—I'll come every day, because I like you! You look like Uncle Teddy, so I'll call you 'uncle.' Good-by!"

With a friendly smile, she ran from the cell.

Conway flung himself face down on the bed. The cell door closed upon him, but he neither heard nor heeded. Heaven and earth had opened their doors again. A child's small white hands had torn down the barriers.

They allowed Norine to see him from day to day. At first he would speak to no one except her. A few days later he called the warder, and asked to see the new superintendent. Osgood came, and No. 10647 explained that henceforth he wanted to work, to exercise, and to be treated exactly like all the other prisoners. As a special favor, he begged that he might be allowed to see Norine sometimes.

The new superintendent was a good man and a big one. He had looked into the story of the man, and, with this in his mind, he gave the necessary permission. From that moment No. 10647 became the model prisoner of Anamosa.

Some say that it was through Osgood's untiring efforts with the Governor of the State that Conway was released on parole eighteen months later. His parting words were to Norine, in the office with her father.

"You won't come back again any more?" Norine asked tearfully.

"No, dear. I would have to be bad to come back, and you want me to be good, don't you?"

"Yes—I want you to be good; but if you don't come back, you'll forget me!"

"I won't forget you. When will you have a birthday?"

"The 15th of May—but that's a long time."

"Only six months. I'll tell you what I'll do. To show you I remember, I'll send you a present every birthday. Will that make you feel better?"

"Yes," she answered doubtfully.

When he said good-by to her father and to herself, and kissed her, she clung to him with all the strength of her little body and sobbed broken-heartedly.

V

THE four months that followed the release of Conway were full of trouble. First he went to Chicago, where he easily secured work in a photo-engraver's shop; but he lost it when his employer learned of his previous attempt to run an engraving business of his own.

He tried wood engraving, but was so good at it that again an employer delved into his antecedents. Conway confessed that he had a prison record, and left the job. In all, he tried six separate positions in Chicago, but as he would not resort to a false name it was only a question of time before he was identified and discharged.

From Chicago he went to Cleveland, but he couldn't stay there. The little money he had when he left prison, and what he had been able to earn since, was nearly exhausted. New York was tugging at his heartstrings. He felt sure that the upstairs room would be awaiting him, and that his "mother" would keep all his possessions intact until he should return.

He arrived in New York when the trees in Madison Square were just breaking into bud. News of his departure from Cleveland and his intended destination—gleaned by a detective—came on a following train, and was delivered to police headquarters. The clerk who opened the missive passed it over to Faulkner as soon as he had noted its contents.

"Guess that's for you, Bill."

"What is it?" asked the detective.

"Conway, the counterfeiter, is out on parole. He's in the city now."

Faulkner betrayed an unusual amount of interest, for him. He was a sleuth of the intellectual type, who specialized in forgers and counterfeiters. He had the reputation of never leaving the scent until his quarry had been run to earth. He glanced through the papers, summarizing the contents in jerky, broken sentences that ran from his lips like water from a thin-necked bottle.

"Rufus Conway—served six and a half years — paroled — cleverest duplicator of fives ever known—gentleman type—artist —since leaving jail has regrown his Vandyke beard—three months in Chicago, one in Cleveland—left for New York April 10 —watch him—will probably go back in the game — plant wasn't discovered when he was arrested, and he wouldn't talk—needs money badly — Bertillon description inclosed—put good man on his trail to find apparatus—nail him with goods if can—

"Yeh, I know about Conway. Have to tackle him myself, Connors!" he told the clerk. "Get all the dope you can. I'll fix up a rig, and hang around Reilly's. He used to be the little tin god among some small fry artistic crooks at Reilly's, so he'll probably land there within a day or two."

Faulkner was right. He met Conway in Reilly's Café on Twenty-Third Street the next night. Introductions are not essential at Reilly's, so it was a simple matter for the detective, dressed like a workingman out of work, and acting and talking the part, to start a conversation.

"How're things?"

"None too good," Conway answered, looking steadily into the detective's face.

Something that was almost recognition glittered in the ex-convict's eyes, but Faulkner never flinched. It is a fallacy that only honest men can receive or give a look straight in the eye. Evildoers train themselves to do it convincingly.

"What's the trouble?"

Conway smiled.

"No work—honest or otherwise. No money — good or bad. No prospects of anything—good, bad, or indifferent."

"There's a contractor putting up a building at Fourth Avenue and Thirty-Second who needs laborers."

Conway glanced at his white, soft, artistic fingers.

"Bricks aren't good for my hands. They'd ruin them for my regular work."

A sudden gleam flashed and died in Faulkner's eyes.

"What's your line?"

The ex-convict looked from his hands to the face of his questioner — looked with wrinkled brows and a serious, penetrating air, as if to discover what manner of man was this. Apparently satisfied with his steady inspection, he replied:

"Engraving—counterfeiting—but I had to give it up. It meant staying away from

New York too long at a country hotel kept by the United States government. It was too confining for me."

"What was the matter with your stuff? Wasn't it good?"

Resentment burned for a moment in Conway's face. It was the glove in his face—a challenge regarding the quality of his work.

"As good as it could be; but I talked, a woman listened, and—"

The gesture completed the sentence.

"If you're going back into the game, and need help in passing the queer, let me know."

This was crude—very crude, especially for Faulkner, who as a rule was too shrewd to play his hand so openly. That it worked in this instance, however, he was sure. Conway hesitated for a moment, then leaned forward.

"You mean that if I make some bills you'll help me to get rid of them?"

Faulkner smothered the note of triumph, and his tones were almost casual.

"Why not? I'm up against it. I guess you are, too."

Conway nodded acquiescence.

"You see, I knew you as soon as you came in," Faulkner continued. "I knew the kind of stuff you turned out in the old days, and I'm willing to bank on it now. *Bank* on it's good, isn't it?"

Conway hesitated. He might have been thinking of the scanty amount of money he had left, or of the greeting of his "mother," who had been so glad to see him.

"I'll get some decent grub, now that you're back," she told him.

He might have been thinking how many jobs he had lost in Chicago and Cleveland, and how certain it was that he would be up against similar conditions in New York if he tried to keep straight. He might have remembered, too, that it was only a short time to the 15th of May—for he glanced at a calendar on the wall—and that he had promised a birthday present to a small golden-haired girl in the West.

Whatever passed through his mind, evidently it was sufficient to force a prompt decision. There was neither caution nor suspicion as he leaned forward and spoke in an undertone:

"If you mean it, and if you're absolutely on the level with me, you can have the first chance at my new run."

Faulkner could barely hide his joy. It illuminated his face; but Conway had turned slightly, so that if he saw the warning, he made no sign.

"I am on the level with you—absolutely," said the detective. "What are you working on—fives?"

"No—I threw away all my old plates and stones. I'm working on a ten. It's a wonder, too. When it's finished, it won't differ from the original by a hair. I tell you it's a masterpiece!"

"When will it be ready?"

"In about ten days."

"Where can I see you, to get the stuff?"

"Suppose we arrange to meet here a week from Friday—about seven?"

"Good enough!"

The detective rose, shook hands with Conway, and sauntered to the door.

"So long, then!"

Very obviously Faulkner walked directly across the street, so that Conway could see him turn down the avenue. He was too clever to arouse any suspicion in his victim before the proper time.

Conway, now alone in the back room at Reilly's, laughed boyishly and banged his clenched fist on the table.

"I'll come back! I'll come back strong—and I'll make them know it!"

He seemed to be highly delighted at the launching of his new business enterprise with a partner who would take most of the risks.

Faulkner, too, was pleased with himself. His brief report to the chief ran as follows:

> Saw Conway, the counterfeiter. He is slipping. Working on a new ten-dollar note. Arrange for four men to cover Reilly's a week from Friday, from six thirty on. They can hide over Levitsky's store, across the street. When Conway comes out, they must follow him wherever he goes. More dope coming. I'll get him!
>
> FAULKNER.

VI

PROMPTLY on the Friday night, at seven o'clock, Conway swung into Reilly's Café and passed through the bar to the back room. Faulkner was there. There was a group of Italians at the center table, so Conway and the detective moved over to a small one near the window.

Conway was in the best of spirits. He monopolized the conversation, giving Faulkner little opportunity to introduce the subject nearest his heart. For two hours they sat talking, smoking, and taking an occasional drink of near beer. Then the Italians left.

Faulkner seized Conway's arm. "Have you got the stuff with you?" he demanded.

Conway raised his eyebrows, as if surprised at his friend's nervousness.

"No—I left everything at home."

"Why? Isn't the new ten finished?"

"I finished it this afternoon—pulled the final proof just before I came here. It's a beauty. There isn't a man in New York, or in America, who could have done a better job."

It was no boasting — just the simple statement of the artist, the master craftsman, who is satisfied with his product.

"When are you going to turn over a bunch to me and let me go to work?"

Conway turned on Faulkner sharply, so that the detective started visibly, and his hand made an involuntary movement toward his hip pocket. Conway took out a cigarette case, opened it slowly and deliberately, and extracted a cigarette. Then he struck a match, and watched it burn down almost to the end before he lit his cigarette.

"I don't know. I've been thinking that perhaps I'd better not get back into the game. The Patten Company asked me yesterday to do some wood cuts for advertisements — real art work — at a good price, too. I told them of my past, but they're good scouts, and said they were more interested in my present and future. So I don't know—I really don't know!"

Faulkner saw his victim eluding him. If the counterfeiter took this honest work, perhaps he would destroy the new plates. Instead of nailing Conway and sending him back to prison, Faulkner would be the laughing stock of the office with his boast: "I'll get him!"

The pretended workingman began to argue. Wasn't the new ten ready? Wasn't it the best that had ever been produced?

Conway nodded affirmatively.

"Then why not run off a few hundred, anyhow? Even if you want to quit and take this advertising job, there's no reason under the sun why you can't cash in on the work you've done. Turn the stuff over to me. I'll get rid of it. I'll take all the risks. You can lay low and grab your profits. Imagine you, Conway, making cheap engravings to sell soap or chewing gum! That's rich! You're not afraid of any one spotting your ten, are you?"

"No!" answered Conway. "I'm not afraid of any one finding anything wrong with this. It's perfect. It had to be. But I hate the thought of leaving New York again. I want to get back into something legitimate."

Faulkner hung on, talking earnestly for a long time, until it seemed from Conway's monosyllabic answers that he was weakening. When the engraver glanced at his watch and said that he was going home, about half past nine, they had a tacit understanding that within a day or two Conway would let Faulkner know definitely what he planned to do.

As the ex-convict left Reilly's, he did not see four men emerge from a building across the street, nor could he look back into the mind of Faulkner and see what was passing there. The detective was complimenting himself on his strategy in planning to arrest Conway this night.

That he would not be in at the death in person was nothing. That was his way of working—never to let any criminal know the man who baited and set the trap. Sometimes juries turned in a verdict of "not guilty." Often judges imposed lenient sentences. Men who went to prison came out again, and it was better, as in this case, that he should not be known to them in his official capacity.

VII

Conway went directly to his room. He stopped downstairs only for a moment, to pass a cheery good night to his "mother."

A few minutes after he had entered his own room, and switched on the light, there was a sudden thunder of blows downstairs. Then he heard the old woman's voice raised in a shrill, bitter protest.

Conway stood by the window overlooking the river. The one light in the room fell on his face. A great change took place within him. It was as if he had put on an iron mask. Heavy footsteps on the run pounded up the stairs, but Conway was motionless. He might have been a statue.

Three detectives and a police officer dashed into the room with revolvers in their hands.

"The game is up, Conway!"

He stood with his arms by his side, his face expressionless, as the detectives glanced around at the camera, the lamp, the acid baths, the bench of finishing tools, and other apparatus scattered about the room.

The spokesman approached Conway carefully, until the mouth of the cocked revolver was pushed against the prisoner's side.

"Look around, Jim! See if you can find the plates and the bills. I'll stick close to him."

Hurriedly they searched the room, but although all the necessary equipment and tools of a counterfeiter were there, they could find no trace of plates or counterfeit bills.

"What's in the iron box on the bench, Jim?"

The man addressed tried to open the box.

"Locked—a snap lock."

Just then Conway sneezed a very natural sneeze. His hand went to his trouser pocket, and pulled out a handkerchief and something metallic that glistened and jangled. With a quick jerk of his arm he threw the metallic object through the window pane into the river.

The detective shrugged his shoulders.

"Bunch of keys! Guess what we want is in the box. Bring it along, Jim. You, Levinson, stay here. Robbins can take care of the old woman downstairs, and we'll look out for Conway. Come on!" he concluded, addressing the prisoner.

Only for a moment Conway's face relaxed with a grimace that should have been a smile, as he asked:

"Where's my friend Faulkner? I expected him to-night. It's too bad to do this without him!"

Evidently his captors were surprised at Conway's knowledge that Faulkner was responsible for his capture. The detectives didn't know that Reilly was a greater friend of Conway's than he was of the police.

"What do you care? You'll find him over the station, if you want him badly enough."

Conway became the silent man again. The mask was replaced. They took him and the locked box to the station, and, after setting the stage and gathering the actors, the play of the preliminary examination began. It was a deadlock from the first. Conway would not answer even the most prosaic, formal questions.

"Open the box," said the chief. "Send for Barrett. Tell him to bring a hammer and a cold chisel."

Barrett, the station man of all work, came, and with three lusty blows smashed the staple and the lock.

"Now we'll see!"

The chief stepped over to the box under the electric light. He lifted the lid. Inside was a roll of paper with a rubber band around it. Under the paper was a wood cut.

The chief tore off the band and spread out the sheet of white paper. An exclamation compounded of dismay and forced admiration broke from his lips.

He saw, framed in a black opening, the face of a lovely little girl with smiling eyes. On the bottom of the sheet, evidently a title for the picture, was the one word "ten." Clipped to there was a note:

> To my dear friend Norine on her tenth birthday. In remembrance—UNCLE.

Then Conway threw back his head and laughed loud and long. It was the laugh of a man who has made a promise to the best that is in him, and is keeping his word, in spite of all the machinations of the world, the flesh, and the devil.

PIERROT—A ROUNDEL

PIERROT, in the garden wistaria falls;
White pillars gleam in the deep dusk below,
While the curve of the crescent moon, rising, enthralls Pierrot.

Where light prisms clash as the tall candles blow,
She stands by a mirror in shadowy halls,
Like a pale princess carved on an old cameo.

Wistaria swings on the old Spanish walls;
The last yellow poppy closed fast long ago;
There are stars in high heaven, and Pierrette calls Pierrot.

Mary Louise Mabie

The Tarnished Woman

A STORY OF MODERN LIFE IN THE INTERNATIONAL PLAYGROUND OF THE RIVIERA

By Vance Thompson

Author of "The Man of the Miracle," "Eat and Grow Thin," etc.

XVI

THE old priest had listened to the Countess Louvorsky, as she told in her half hysterical way the story of the house of Kurokin; and yet, even while his attention was fixed upon what she was saying, certain clandestine mental operations, which had nothing to do with the thought of the moment, were going on in another part of his mind.

He had a memory of a small dinner party in the great white *palazzo* of Torpichen's aunt, the Princess Castelmare. He saw again the feeble, tragic face of Lady Milding, as she leaned toward Torpichen, telling him—now he remembered—the story of the three needles. Her husband had intervened, reducing her to silence, but she had said enough to stir her hearers' curiosity. It seemed strange that she should have chosen this subject, and no other, for dinner talk—with Torpichen. Why with Torpichen?

The *padre* was standing near Mr. Ricci. They were both looking down at the old countess in her chair. The large, white face was tremulous, and there was a sort of hysterical clucking in her throat. To question her would have been meaningless cruelty. There was unkindness even in looking at her.

Mr. Ricci went over to the table, and the old priest followed him.

" Would it be worth while," the *padre* suggested, " asking Mr. Torpichen about—well, about this? I myself have heard some talk about it before, and I think he has."

" You know more than you have said, father?"

" No."

Mr. Ricci turned toward the maid, who had drawn close to the old countess, and was seemingly offering comfort.

" Grazia—that's your name, isn't it?—is Mr. Torpichen without?"

" In the other room, sir."

" Ask him to come here."

They waited in silence while Grazia went on her errand. Torpichen, expecting a summons, had been waiting within call. As he entered the room, he glanced quickly around it, seeing, in that one look, priest, magistrate, clerk, and countess.

For a moment he paused near the door. His face was very pale, but his eyes were steady.

" Will you be kind enough to come here?" the magistrate said softly.

Torpichen went slowly to the table, where Mr. Ricci stood with one hand behind his back.

" Thank you; and now," the magistrate added sharply, " tell me about this!"

Bringing his hand around — there was melodrama in his make-up—Mr. Ricci thrust out the bloodstained rag stuck through with the rusty needles.

" What do you know about this?" he shouted.

Before he glanced down at the magistrate's hand and what it held, Torpichen stared him full in the face.

" There is no occasion for raising your voice like that," he said calmly. " I can hear you perfectly. What is it you wish me to look at?"

When his eyes fell on the gruesome relic of crime, he drew back with instinctive disgust.

" What do I know about it?" he repeated. " Nothing!"

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The Countess Louvorsky stirred in her chair. Emotions usually passed over her quickly, like squalls sweeping over a mountain lake; and now her curiosity was taking hold of her.

"He? What should he know?"

"The needles you see there," the *padre* put in quietly, "are evidently those Lady Milding told you about at the dinner party. You remember the night we dined with the Princess Castelmare?"

"I remember something about it, father," Torpichen replied. "You are quite right. There was something said — a Russian story—"

The word Russian pulled him up. What were they driving at? What had these needles to do with—with what had happened in this room and house? What had they to do with Torpichen? What was he expected to know? Why the devil were those men watching him like that — especially Ricci and the clerk? The *padre's* eyes were human enough, but why were the others watching like wolves?

"I know nothing about the needles," he repeated.

"No? I'm sorry," Mr. Ricci said. He did not raise his voice this time. "I hoped you could tell us something."

"No," retorted Torpichen impatiently. "How did they come here?"

"That is precisely what we want to ascertain, Mr. Torpichen. You, I understand, do not know—"

"Nothing, nothing! How should I?"

"Yes, how should he? Don't be stupid, Ricci!" the countess called from the depth of her chair. "What should he know of the needles? What do you expect to learn by thrusting them in people's faces and yelling? No wonder the young man is angry! If you had treated me with proper consideration, I would have told you. I will tell you now, if you think it may help to avenge Prince Kurokin. I never asked him about it. How could I? But I've told it again and again, and always the same way—the way it is whispered in Russia. Every one knows it."

She had pulled herself forward in her chair and was leaning there, with one elbow on her mighty knee; and she told her story with a kind of terrified satisfaction, as if glad to talk of such things, and yet daunted by the horror of them.

As she began to speak, the *padre* went back to his chair in the shadows, and Mr. Ricci took his seat by the table. Only Torpichen did not move. He stood erect, seemingly indifferent to what was going on about him, looking straight through the broken windows into the garden, where the Judas tree tossed its red-bellied leaves in an unending dance of blood.

"Yes, countess?" Mr. Ricci interposed suavely.

"Yes, I'll tell you. You know we do not like to think of these terrible things. We laugh and gamble and drink—do anything, because, if we thought of such things, we should all go mad. Russia—our holy Russia—where Christ has met Judas once more, where millions of Christ's children are dying in torture and starvation! Alas, holy Russia!"

The old woman, swathed in fat and folly, painted and wigged and tinseled, was no longer ridiculous. At that moment she seemed as tragic as her own unhappy land, where Lazarus—ten millions of him—with starving, bestial face and bony hands gropes for food in the filth of the gutter and in the naked fields. Her eyes were haunted, as if she still saw things of horror—blind, inhuman things, tearing with teeth and claws at helpless humanity.

"Oh, must I tell you? I have tried so hard to forget it all, and you have brought it back! My God!"

"Tell us only what the needles mean, countess," suggested the *padre* in his quiet way. "What did they mean to Prince Kurokin?"

"But that is it!" the countess answered hastily. "The fiend who has killed him knew it better than any one. He was in the house—their country place. The general trusted him. His wife, the princess, and the poor prince—they all trusted him. It was he who arranged for their flight and helped them get together such of their possessions as they could carry away with them; and the night they were to leave he brought the Bolshevist wolves down on them! I do not know how Prince Kurokin escaped. We Russians never speak to one another of such things. They seized the general and his wife as they were slipping out of the house. The old man struggled with them in the dark. He was badly wounded, but he went on living hour after hour, in agony. They had dragged his wife — my friend, my friend! — back into the house, and she did not know what they were doing to the brave old man.

"'Only let me go to him!' she kept crying. 'Only let me see him!'

"The frightened servants heard her. Every one in Russia knows it—the Kurokin needles! And the Judas devil who had betrayed them—had betrayed even his own father—shouted:

"'Don't let her see him! Don't let her talk!'

"Did he think there was something she wanted to say to her husband—something about himself which he dared not let the other wolves hear? We can't know—not in this world!" the countess murmured, dropping her voice and muttering what was perhaps a prayer for the dead.

The *padre* roused her with a question:

"And the poor martyr never saw her husband again?"

"See him?" the countess cried. "Yes, she saw him, but not until daylight. They waited until daylight, while the old general lay outside the door, on the ground, dying from his torture, but without a groan. I knew him — he would not groan for the dogs! They kept her inside in the traitor's hands, but he dared not kill her. He was afraid of them—coward and murderer and Judas! They had told him to bring her out at daybreak, when they would shoot her husband, so that she might see—so that she might see and call to his suffering soul! Just at dawn they dragged her out of doors, and the general struggled up to greet her, calling her his little darling. They thrust him aside, and then—and then—there, before his eyes, they sewed up her mouth with one of those long, rusty needles, so that she could not answer when he called to her! With the others they sewed up her poor tortured eyes; and then they shot him, and she died, too. Staggering to him in his death agony, she fell dead. And those are the needles—the Kurokin needles!" the countess cried, and again collapsed in her chair, quivering with the emotion that she herself had created.

In his mind Mr. Ricci saw it like a picture—the group of savage outlaws around the great house in far-away Russia, brought there by the peasant's son; the torture and killing of General Kurokin and his wife; the escape, by some lucky chance, of the prince.

Then came the pursuit. The disappointed bandit, cheated of his full vengeance on the Kurokin family, and failing to get their fortune, had followed the prince over half of Europe. It had been a long hunt—a hunt for revenge and for loot—and it had ended there in the ravine, where the dead body had been thrown, battered, mutilated, with a bullet in the heart. It had been the accomplishment of a frightful vengeance, conceived in infamy and achieved in blood and cruelty.

Somewhere in Italy, or perhaps beyond her frontiers, the murderer was wandering —free. None too soon a new warning should go out, and Mr. Ricci at once dispatched his secretary on the mission. Ere long the words, "wanted for murder!" would be ringing in police ears on both sides of the frontier—wanted for murder—Russian vagabond, outlaw, spy, thief, the man of the three needles.

It took some time for Ricci to write out his instructions, short and grim as they were, and send them to the police authorities; and in the mean time the countess came slowly out of her emotional storm. Among the portable property attached to her by gold chains was a gilt-tipped flask, containing smelling salts. She sniffed at it for a while, and then beckoned Grazia in her old dominant way.

"You found those frightful things, eh? In Guido's room?"

"Hidden," the girl said darkly.

"Then what are you about, Ricci?" the countess demanded, heaving herself up in the chair and frowning at him. "Send for Guido, my man. He is my man, even though I left him here as butler. Girl, ring that bell."

In answer to the summons, Guido himself appeared. His first glance went to the magistrate, but Mr. Ricci showed no impatience. His interest seemed to be wholly centered on Andrew Torpichen.

He had not forgotten the *padre's* reference to the venom that Guido had shown while describing Torpichen's quarrel with the prince, but at the time he did not think it vitally important. Guido appeared to be the kind of flunky who is always venomous. While the magistrate scrutinized Torpichen keenly, his thoughts were chiefly concerned with what the countess had said regarding Kurokin's enemy—the outlaw who had been hunting him down. That evidence seemed to him highly important.

When at last Guido entered, he looked at him with apparent indifference; but that first casual look was enough to awaken all his interest in the man.

Guido had lost the truculent and denunciatory air that he had worn during his previous examinations. There was apprehension in his flabby face, and in his roving eyes, as he glanced from the magistrate to the huge old woman, all curls and fat and jewels, in the wide chair.

The *padre*, from his shadowy corner, studied the butler. It was his business to know the shifty souls of men—especially of weak and evil men. That was his work in the world—spiritual diagnosis. Before he could heal the malady, or extirpate the moral cancer, he must know. In Guido he saw many familiar symptoms—cowardice and secrecy crowding hard upon treachery and hiding behind falsehood. Of what was the fellow afraid?

" Come here!" commanded the countess, waving a fat hand at him. " Now, my fine rascal," she added sharply, as Guido approached, " just understand me! You can fool these gentlemen as much as you please, but don't try it with me!"

" I don't understand," muttered Guido deprecatingly. " If there is anything—"

" There certainly is! I never knew anything to go on in this house that you didn't know all about! You know what Kurokin was up to these last few weeks—dodging about trying to unearth that enemy of his—that vile assassin, who finally succeeded in killing him. You know that! Don't stand there like a fool! Are you trying to shield that man? You needn't look at Mr. Ricci—look at me!"

Guido did look at her, with gloomy, half veiled, apprehensive eyes.

" I don't know any assassin," he muttered sullenly. " I am not trying to shield any one. I don't know what the countess means."

Unexpectedly the *padre* spoke. His voice was unusually gentle.

" Pardon me, countess, for interrupting you," he said; " but I should like to ask Mr. Ricci if he will be good enough—"

" Yes?" Mr. Ricci asked.

" To send for my gardener, a poor devil of a peasant," he went on. " Beppo," he added, suddenly raising his voice.

The name seemed to hit Guido like a blow between the eyes. He fought in vain for his self-control.

" Ah!" murmured Ricci under his breath. " Ah, very interesting!"

He had not the faintest idea who Beppo was, or why his name had been shouted at the sullen servant; but he saw the effect. Nodding to the priest, he said:

" Of course! I think this is just the moment for me to question your Beppo once more—in this man's presence. Yes, thank you, *padre!*"

Guido shifted his feet and tried to pull himself up, but the words " question him once more " were knocking at his brain. What had Beppo said? What could he prove? What did they know? It was the uncertainty that terrified him most. He watched them—the people in the room—like a trapped animal.

" Beppo!" Mr. Ricci repeated. " Yes, Beppo!"

Again that name! Guido quailed at the shock, and the keystone of his will broke. There was little left in him but a kind of angry terror.

" Of course I may say, *padre*," the magistrate went on, " that your Beppo has already confessed, and—"

" Then he lied! He lied!" Guido shouted. " I don't know any assassin! He came here, that Russian—yes, have I ever denied it? Has any one ever asked me? He inquired for Prince Kurokin, but the prince was not at home. A Russian beggar—a vagabond! And he went away, and that's all I know," he concluded tremulously, with wild gesticulations.

The countess cackled triumphantly.

" I thought we'd get it out of you, my fine rascal!" she exclaimed.

Mr. Ricci's teeth came together with a snap of satisfaction, as if they had suddenly closed upon his prey. So the Russian vagabond, Kurokin's deadly enemy, had after all crossed the frontier, and had even penetrated to the villa—the man who had come to kill! There was still much to learn, but this fact, stark and tragic, opened up the very heart of the crime. It explained the mysterious savagery of the murder, the mutilation and robbery.

Suddenly the magistrate stood up, and, crossing the room, stood in front of the butler, with the bloody packet of needles in his hand.

" Now speak the truth, or it will be the worse for you. Where did this thing come from? Answer me!" he said, in a tone of command.

Guido turned white and fell back, staggering, against the wall. He made an effort to speak, but the words died on his quivering lips.

"Will you speak? Where, I say, did you get—this?"

"From the Russian—the vagabond. He thrust it through the gate and ordered me to give it to—to the prince," Guido finally managed to say.

"And you gave it to him?"

"Certainly."

"What did he say?"

"He swore. The thing gave him a shock, and he threw it into the grate."

"He was frightened?"

"Horribly."

"He had good cause to be!"

Guido began to recover himself. He glanced around the room until his eyes fell upon Torpichen. Then he seemed to take a sudden resolve.

"I have something more to say," he began. "I consider it my duty."

"Well, out with it!" snapped the magistrate impatiently.

Guido squared himself, took a step forward, and, with a look of malignant triumph, said:

"It was the American, Mr. Torpichen, who smuggled the Russian across the frontier, hidden in his motor car."

"What is that?" exclaimed Mr. Ricci incredulously.

"Ask him," persisted Guido.

Torpichen approached, very calm and self-possessed. The magistrate turned to him.

"You hear? This man accuses you of participation in the crime. He accuses you of having smuggled that Russian assassin across the frontier in your motor car!"

"It is a lie!" declared the *padre*, coming swiftly across the room. "It is a lie!"

"No," Torpichen said calmly, "it is the truth."

XVII

As if she had been traveling in far-off regions and shadows, Lamia came back wearily to the world of real things, and to herself. She lay very quiet, with half open eyes, wondering. About her was the whiteness of her own room, and this was her own bed in which she lay. She did not try to move. She was immobilized in infinite weariness.

A nurse entered the room and looked at her; then, seeing no signs of change, she went softly out again, whispering something. What had she whispered? And to whom?

Lamia turned her head on the pillow. Near the bed was a low chair, and some one sat there, motionless, drooping forward. The light in the room was feeble. It came from without, and was sifted through the latticed window blinds. Lamia could not see who was brooding there beside the bed, but she knew.

She did not speak his name. She lay very still, watching, through veiled eyes, this guardian of her sleep, absorbing his presence as if it were a veritable elixir of life. She knew that she had come back, not only to herself, but to him.

In that world of shadows and silence where she had been wandering, she had always felt that he was following her, urging her to come back—to come back to him; and she had obeyed. It was for him she had returned from the shadows and the silence. She had answered his cry and his need. What she must give him was life, and not death—the hourly sacrifice of life, and not a sudden and sacrificial death.

After a long while she whispered his name:

"Andrew!"

Slowly, half unbelieving, Torpichen bent over her and laid his hand lightly on her forehead.

"Lamia!"

"Yes," she murmured, "and it is really you! I have been dreaming so long—and I heard you calling—"

"Day and night, Lamia, I have called to you!"

"I know," she murmured. "I heard you, dear one."

He raised her in his arm and held her. Her arm stole around his neck. Her heavy hair swept his cheek. They clung there, in a silence full of avowals and promises.

At last she pushed her hair away and looked into his eyes.

"Yes, it is you," she said in a low voice. "That is why I came back. I have been very far away, always wandering, and suffering. I knew that somewhere I should come to the crossroads and the fear—you remember, Andrew? Just a little while ago, in the shadows, I heard the running feet. Suddenly I knew that I was at the crossroads, and my very soul was dying with dread, for I was certain that I should see, standing there, the fear that has haunted me all my life! Andrew, I forced myself to go on, with open eyes. I looked, and the fear was not there, Andrew—only you! You were there, oh, sad and yearning! You were there, calling me, calling me to come back; and I came a long, long way back to you!"

"To love and to safety—and to me!" he whispered. "The fear has gone forever. Don't you understand, dear? The fear was not there, because you had met it and vanquished it forever when you sacrificed yourself that I might live—when you gave your dear heart's blood for me! Oh, Lamia, Lamia, my love, my love!"

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "No—I don't remember—"

She relaxed in his arms, and he laid her back gently on the pillow. She was silent, but her eyes never left his face.

Gradually it seemed that memory began to wake in her dazed mind. She took one of his hands and laid it on her breast.

"It was here, was it not? There's a wound here—a bullet—I remember; but, Andrew, when I was far away I learned much, and I know it was more than that! It was my old destiny sending me out to meet the fear—and conquer it."

"Your sacrifice killed it forever!"

"It was my love, Andrew."

"Our love, dear! Nothing can ever touch you again. My love is around you and over you and under your feet, forever!"

A little hint of the other wayward Lamia looked out of her eyes.

"I am not at all the kind of girl you should love, you know," she said, with a brave attempt to be her old light self—a brave attempt, but pitiful in its weakness.

"Dearest, dearest!" he murmured, his face close to her white face. "You have come to me in a new birth. You have been recreated for our love—reborn into a new and primal world, where there is nothing but our love and our happiness!"

"I wonder, shall I be happy? Perhaps I have not suffered enough. I—"

Suddenly, as if memory had come rushing back upon her, she gave a little scream and struggled up.

"My God! Andrew—that man! Where is he? Is he dead?"

Torpichen held her close.

"He has gone. He left the house days ago," he explained with careful emphasis, forcing the words into her agitated mind. "Be calm and steady, dear. You are quite safe—always safe in my arms."

"No—you do not know him," she persisted feverishly. "He is not dead? Then he will return, and then—for God's sake, Andrew, take me away! Let us go—quick, quick!"

"Soon, dearest, soon."

"Now, Andrew!" She clung to him. "Something evil, evil, evil is coming to find us here—in this very room! Oh, Andrew!"

Her voice rose, wailing. From the room beyond the nurse came, swift and silent, to the bedside.

"Mr. Torpichen," she said in whispered expostulation, "you should have told me that she had come to herself. There, Miss Borg, there!"

With quiet efficiency she took control of her patient, and sent Torpichen out of the room. He waited without, tortured with anxiety and self-reproach until, after what seemed a lifetime, the nurse came to him.

"It is all right, I trust, Mr. Torpichen; but you should have called me when she wakened."

"I know. I'm sorry, but—"

"I have consented to her seeing you again, but you must stay only a moment. She is quiet now."

He found Lamia lying very still, with a drowsy look on her face. He wondered what drug the nurse had given her.

"She says you have never left me, Andrew, day or night," Lamia whispered.

"I shall always be with you," he replied, and stooped and softly stroked her hair.

"You are putting strength in me, dear—I feel it."

Her eyes closed, and sleep took her. She had gone back into the shadows and the silence, but this time it was to find there rest and safety and forgetfulness.

Torpichen tiptoed out and spoke to the nurse.

"Miss Borg is asleep, I think," he said. "I am going down to my hotel. I shall not be very long. In case I should be wanted for anything, you can reach me there."

He telephoned Marwick to bring up his car. He waited for it in the little boudoir adjoining Lamia's bedroom. One window looked out on the dying day. The sun, sinking toward the flat, untroubled sea, stained the sky with crimson; but underneath the splashes of red there streamed banners of cloudy green—the green rays which fall so rarely on the Mediterranean.

It may have been the menace in these greenish clouds that roused Torpichen from his daydream of hope and happiness. He knew that his own position was not without considerable danger. Clearly enough he understood the implication in the statement that Guido had made to the magistrate. His mind flew to the legend of the little green men and the catastrophes which invariably followed their appearance.

Whether or not he and Lamia had seen one of these mythical beings, as she believed, it was certain that catastrophe had followed swift and fast upon the circumstance. Her intuition had been clear and true on the day of their visit to the earthquake town. He recalled the extraordinary way in which she had suddenly gone to pieces. Again he saw her face—the color of ashes—drooping lifeless over his arm.

Yes, whatever the cause, her premonition had been verified. Catastrophe had fallen on them both. It was weighing upon them even now. Again Guido's accusation, bitter with venom, rang in his ears:

"It was the American, Mr. Torpichen, who smuggled the Russian across the frontier, hidden in his motor car!"

If only he had reported the circumstance to the authorities on arriving at San Remo! It would have been the wise, the obvious thing to do. He wished that he had done it; and yet he knew that if he had to do it all over again, he would act in the same way.

In the glimpse that Torpichen had had of the fellow at Mentone, he seemed harmless enough. There was no reason for supposing that he was a criminal, especially such a criminal as the Countess Louvorsky had painted—a demon of cruelty, savagery, and blood lust. The vagrom creature's concealment in Torpichen's car had not seemed worth mentioning. He had not deemed it worth a second thought.

And yet there was the ugly fact—it was he, Andrew Torpichen, and no other, who had brought the criminal across the frontier and into San Remo—unconsciously, of course; but still it was he who had aided the refugee to evade the police. The man he had smuggled in had killed Prince Kurokin; and Kurokin was his own enemy. Between them there had been a violent quarrel on the night of the murder—high words and threats, blows and shooting, all witnessed by the servants.

Torpichen saw his position clearly enough. Owing to a mere chance happening, which he had forgotten in a few hours, it was assumed that he had brought in this outlaw to take a vengeance which he dared not take himself. The very bestiality of the crime had so far proclaimed his innocence; but now the police would use it to link him with this murderer.

For himself he was not so much concerned. He had always had confidence in his star and in his destiny. He was not afraid of the accidental. It was his creed that the only evil that can fall upon a man is what he pulls down on himself; but he knew how implacable a thing is the evidence of circumstance — how it creeps around a man slowly, like a rising tide. Insignificant at first, it hardly wets his feet, and then, rushing on, it engulfs him. The quarrel, the blow, this outlaw hidden in his car—the sinister evidence of circumstance was closing around him, muttering, proclaiming his guilt of Kurokin's murder.

And when Lamia knew?

She was fighting her way back to life. She was coming back to him and their love; and how could she face this new horror? The happiness in his heart turned cold at the thought. He must shield her. More than himself he must shield her; but how?

XVIII

Torpichen was still at the window, awaiting the coming of his car, staring out heedlessly at the strange bands of green light along the dim horizon. He was weary from his long vigil through days and nights of alternate hope and despair, but it seemed to him that sleep had vanished from the world. His tense nerves keyed him up to wakefulness.

He turned at a faint rap at the door. Grazia was there, and behind her, at the stairhead, stood his chauffeur. Marwick had been of use to him, bringing him the things he needed—his letters, and the clothes he changed into now and then. No one, thus far, had interfered with their communications. The chauffeur had come and gone in his calm, discreet way, unquestioned, though perhaps not unfollowed.

Marwick waited until Grazia had gone down the stairs. Then he spoke.

"I've got the car here, sir, but"—he paused, and almost showed emotion—"well, I'm afraid I'm responsible for some of this new trouble, sir."

"What is it, Marwick?"

"I wanted you to know, sir. I'm afraid I'm to blame for that butler's statement to the police that we brought the murderer in here, in our car. If I'd kept my mouth shut, no one would have known it; but I mentioned it—I don't know why. It was rather a joke on us, I thought. It must have got round to this butler, and there it is! I wanted you to know."

"It is all right, Marwick," Torpichen replied. "Why shouldn't you have spoken of it? I might have done so myself, if I hadn't forgotten it."

"Thank you, sir, but I'm sorry. This magistrate has been at me. I told him just how it happened. You didn't know and I didn't know that the fellow was in the car, not until the moment he came out of it like a jack-in-the-box, there at the garage, and was up and off like one o'clock."

"What did Mr. Ricci think of it?"

"He said it was all right; but what he really thought," Marwick said reflectively, "of course I don't know. He's a close one!"

"Well, it is not up to you, Marwick. Fate is dealing the cards. You can take me down to the hotel."

"Thank you, sir. There's another thing—"

"What now?"

"It's this, sir. You haven't left the house since—since that night. I wonder whether you are going to be allowed—excuse me—to leave it this afternoon!"

"And who do you think will prevent it?"

"It's like this, sir," Marwick replied. "It hasn't taken me long to find out that the place is watched. They are loafing about under cover, but you can pick up the shadow of 'em almost anywhere. Of course, I don't know who it is they're watching."

"I understand, Marwick. I'm going, all the same."

It was as Marwick surmised. When the car reached the gates of the villa, a cool-looking young man touched his hat politely to Torpichen and asked if there was any objection to his riding down to the town with them.

"None at all," said Torpichen. "Get in with the chauffeur."

The detective took his seat in front. He made no attempt to speak to the glowering Marwick, as the car sped down the long, curving roadway. When they pulled up at the hotel, he slipped out, opened the door of the car, and held it until Torpichen descended. Then he turned away.

Torpichen was quite sure that he had not gone very far—or, if he had indeed gone, that other feet were on the trail. It was a strange feeling to be under the observation of the suave and silent Italian police; but that was not the worst. As he traversed the lobby of the hotel, he felt that the employees and the passing guests were looking at him with avid curiosity.

There were people in the lobby; there were more in the great salon beyond. He made no pretense of not looking at them. Everything they did seemed equivocal. A gesture, a glance, a smile—two men speaking in a low voice—everything seemed suspicious and menacing. It was as if they were saying:

"That is the man!"

He was glad to reach the semiprivacy of his own apartment. He bathed, and it was only when he was dressing that he noticed that the valet who served him was not his usual man. He made no remark. If the fellow was a spy, then he was a spy, and that was all there was to it.

But the feeling that he was being watched, always and everywhere, began to exasperate his nerves. He had an almost incontrollable impulse to run away from it. He told himself that a man might live in the shadow of crime until he began to absorb it; for, as the pseudo-valet handed him his coat, he found himself thinking how easy and pleasant it would be to toss the fellow out of the window and put an end to his spying.

He pulled up his thoughts and laughed at himself. When he went down to the lobby, and walked on toward the palm room, he discovered that he was confronting these whispering people with a new sense of arrogance. If they had anything to say to him, let them say it!

No one spoke to him, though he had known some of the men slightly—and some of the women. He sat down at an empty table and summoned a waiter, wondering, as the fellow approached, whether he, too, were some one in disguise set to watch him.

"Tea, please," he said curtly.

There was the usual crowd in the palm room. Torpichen knew that he was being stared at with curiosity, covert or open. He was in a challenging mood, and his eyes roved insolently from table to table, as if he were demanding:

"Well, what have you to say?"

Then he saw Betty Demdyke. She was seated at one of the tables only a few feet away from him. The man she was with was Hugh Forbess, and they were deep in talk.

Betty was a trifle repressed, Torpichen fancied, but he was not quite sure. She looked very young, and suddenly it seemed to him that his own youth was immeasurably far behind him. The last few weeks in his life had been like years and decades of passion and pain.

From her little shoes to the fur at her throat and the feather in her hat, Betty was bright with youthfulness. She was quiet, but there was no hint of unhappiness about her. Torpichen was glad of that, for he wanted her to be happy. Indeed, her happiness was the one thing that could make him forget his own unworthiness.

Nevertheless—for man is an imperfect animal—he was surprised to find in his heart a slight regret that their boy and girl love had been, it appeared, as fragile and evanescent with Betty as it had been with him. It seemed like a mere butterfly of love — a flash of beauty and desire that passed and was not. It had fluttered away forever now.

Perhaps she would forget—perhaps she had already forgotten. He hoped so. He had not seen her before since the night when they parted in their aunt's *palazzo*. He had written to her. It had been a hard letter to write, but it shadowed forth his humility and his pain. Betty had evidently understood. Her answer had been a dignified little note, kindly enough—all that could be expected for the funeral rites of a butterfly.

He could see her profile. There was a faint smile on her lips. Beyond her Forbess provided a background of deference and veiled adoration. Unwearying in its quest, the spirit of life was seeking incarnation, and now its conspiracy was enveloping these two young people who were smiling faintly at each other across the teacups; and Torpichen knew that the spirit of life would have its way with them.

He went over to their table.

"How do you do, Betty?" he said in a matter-of-fact way.

She had a moment for self-recovery—if indeed she needed one—while Forbess was rising and the men were greeting each other. Then she gave Torpichen her hand, and smiled up at him.

"How nice to see you again!" she remarked blandly. There was no apparent curiosity in her voice as she added: "Is everything all right?"

"Thank you."

"Am I brown?" Betty went on. "We've been yachting, you know—and isn't mother a good sailor, Mr. Forbess? And the princess, too?"

She laughed — why, Torpichen did not know; but he noticed that she shared with Forbess a smile of complicity. He was seeing a new Betty—a Betty who was acquiring a new social manner of attack and defense.

"She wants to see you, Andrew."

"The princess?"

"Yes—and mother, too."

"Please tell them that of course I'll call, as soon—as soon as I can."

"Yes—I understand, Andrew."

Betty's eyes were serious now, and there was an unspoken question in the grave look she gave him; but Torpichen refused to recognize it. What could he say to her? What could he tell her of the dark story of the villa, and of the tragedy of terror and vengeance that lay dark upon it? And of the woman lying there on a white bed? And of himself and the crime linked to his name?

He looked down into her upturned face, and saw the affection in it—the affection of kinship that persists in spite of everything; but all he said was:

"Yes, I am sure you understand, Betty."

She found the right thing to say.

"You mustn't forget your friends, Andrew. Must he, Mr. Forbess?"

She seemed to be including them all in a defensive league of friendship, in which there was a touch of kinship.

Her hand went out to Torpichen, and he said good-by over it, holding it fast and firm.

"Good-by, Forbess," he repeated.

The men, too, shook hands. They were standing thus, looking down at Betty's upturned face, when the manager of the hotel came ambling up, frock-coated and apologetic, and spoke Torpichen's name.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Please excuse me, Mr. Torpichen, but I've been asked—I've been requested to—"

"What do you want?" Torpichen asked shortly, for the interruption angered him a little.

The manager of the hotel lost some of his humility, and the deference went out of his voice.

"There has been a telephone message from the Villa Corinte. You are wanted there at once, sir. That was the message."

"All right—thanks!"

He waited until the manager had gone away. Then he said:

"Good-by, Betty."

With a nod to Forbess, he went out. His motor car was still waiting. Marwick was at the wheel; beside him, calm, seemingly uninterested, sat the detective.

XIX

"It is you she is asking for now," said the nurse. "That is why I rang."

The nurse and Grazia were in the little boudoir adjoining Lamia's bedroom.

"And she is really better?" Grazia asked.

"You'll see," the nurse replied, smiling, and opened the bedroom door.

Lamia was reclining on a *chaise longue*. She had insisted upon leaving her bed. A dressing gown of some pale gold material was thrown around her, and her bright hair was flowing about her in tangled waves of color. She was languid looking, but her eyes shone. The tide of life was rising in her. It was pulsing in the long white body and staining the fair face with hints of rose—faint hints, for her beauty had been washed paler by illness. She lolled there like a white flower in a golden cup.

"*Madonna!*" Grazia exclaimed, in an ecstasy of admiration.

She ran across the floor, and, throwing herself on her knees, kissed the soft, white hand and began to cry in sheer maternal gladness. Lamia smiled, and stroked the girl's face.

"Foolish!" she said. "What is there to cry about? Are you sorry to see me out of bed?"

"It is happiness"—Grazia kissed her hand again—"because you have come back. I shall make a pilgrimage on my knees to the shrine of the Madonna del Borgo, to give thanks that you are alive once more."

"I didn't know you loved me so much, Grazia. You are good, very good. I want you to brush my hair, if you will. It is like a jungle."

Gently and deftly Grazia smoothed out the tangle of red and gold, with long, soothing strokes of the brush.

"Mr. Torpichen has not come back, Grazia?"

"Not yet."

"Nurse told me he had gone to the hotel. I hope he will not be long," Lamia added. She was already anticipating his return—the sound of his footsteps, the look in his eyes, the touch of his lips and hands. "Are you making me beautiful, Grazia?"

"Always you are as beautiful as the Madonna!"

"Am I truly? I have been afraid of my mirror."

"Look, please," Grazia said, and held up in front of her an oval glass.

What Lamia saw was a face younger, infinitely tender—as if the tenderness were the legacy her own suffering had left her. The mouth drooped like a dew-hungry flower. In the blue eyes was the smothered fire of intention and desire.

"Yes, yes!" she whispered to the image in the glass. It was her face, and yet unfamiliar. "And, Grazia, I want my opals—all my opals. You have the key. Get them."

"Lie quiet now for a while," urged Grazia, "and I will bring them."

She made the pillows easy, and, as Lamia lay back in them, she spread the long hair down either side of the slender body, so that it lay there half hid in shimmering splendor—the white body here, and there the covering folds of yellow silk and the frame of metal-colored hair. It was beauty to which even the opals, with their misty fire, could add only affirmation.

"*Madonna!*" Grazia whispered, as she gazed on her mistress and went softly from the room.

The jewel case was kept in the boudoir, locked in an old ebony cabinet. In woman's way, there was a hiding place for the key of the cabinet. This was a secret shared between Grazia and her mistress. Only Lamia herself could open the box, leather without and steel within, which contained the jewels.

Grazia took the key from its familiar hiding place under the edge of the carpet, and opened the cabinet. Then she gave a muffled scream. The jewel case was not inside the box.

There could be no mistake. She herself had stored it safely away there, as she had done scores of times before. She knew just where she had set it down—far back, behind a partition of black wood; and now it was nowhere to be seen. It had vanished, with the opals and the pearls and the great flat emeralds—all the jewels which the *signora* had fondled and loved.

Grazia was responsible, for the jewels had been given into her charge. Her first thought was to rush screaming to her mistress, but a second thought gave her control of herself. She would not speak of the robbery — not yet — not even to the nurse, who had just entered the room. She must tell the *padre*. He was always her refuge; but where was she to find him? And then—

"When will Mr. Torpichen return, nurse?"

"I do not know, but he can be reached by telephoning to the hotel."

A moment later Grazia's grim voice was sounding over the wires in the ear of the manager of the hotel, and the imperative message, when he delivered it to Torpichen, had lost nothing in transmission.

When the motor car, breasting the final sweep of the road, came in sight of the villa, Grazia darted out through the iron gate and halted it.

"What is it? For God's sake—"

"No, no—it is not what you think. The *signora* is all right, Mr. Torpichen. Indeed, she is better—quite like herself. No, it is something else—devil's work!"

Torpichen pulled the excited girl into the automobile.

"Now, tell me, what has happened?" he asked impatiently.

"Wickedness! Devil's work!" replied Grazia bluntly.

She raced into a vehement account of the theft. Her voice rang out as she denounced the "thief and devil" who had taken her mistress's jewels.

"For there is a devil in the house!" she shouted, and shook her square little fist at the villa.

Torpichen listened attentively, but no more so than the silent man who sat in the front seat of the car, with Marwick.

"You suspect some one, Grazia?"

"Suspect? I've been all over the house, in all the servants' rooms, everywhere, except one place—Guido's room. I didn't go there, because I know he is a devil and a thief. He is in there now. That is what I wanted to tell you. He hasn't got away. He is waiting his chance—perhaps until later on in the night; but he's there. Come!"

The silent man on the seat, although he had listened attentively, had not moved. Since they left the hotel he had not exchanged a word with the indignant Marwick, or glanced back at the man whose shadow he had become. He was a hound-faced sort of man, all eyes and nose and jowls, as if bred and trained for hunting; and he had the air of being as intelligent and resourceful as some trusted leader of the pack.

Now at last he gave tongue. He turned to Torpichen with a word of apology.

"This girl seems to know what she's talking about," he said. "If a robbery has been committed—"

"If!" Grazia interjected scornfully. "Don't I know?"

"Anyway, we'll look into it," the detective continued calmly. "There is more than one of my comrades here now, and we'll report the matter at once. Leave your car here, sir, and go in quietly with this girl. The matter is out of your hands—and hers, too, mark you. There are enough of us within call to look after it."

He was quiet, competent, and, in a way, authoritative; and Torpichen, because there was nothing else to do, did as he was told. Leaving his car in Marwick's charge, he slipped through the gate, with Grazia at his side, and entered the garden.

His shadow, quitting him for a while, stopped to confer with the man on guard at the gate.

"Can you show me Guido's room from the outside?" Torpichen asked the girl.

"Certainly. It's at the back, adjoining the prince's apartment," Grazia explained. "His excellency liked to have the fellow at hand."

They entered the villa, and passed through the hall to the door at the back. This exit gave upon a square, roofless court with plants and flowers.

The story above was divided by just such a hall as traversed the ground floor of the villa. Lamia's apartments were on the right of this; on the left were the suite of Prince Kurokin and—the last room at the back—the chamber of Guido, who had been at the same time the prince's valet and the butler of the house.

It was under the window of Guido's room that Grazia halted, drawing Torpichen with her into the thick shrubbery of the garden.

"That's his window," she whispered.

For the moment it was dark and empty —mere rectangular blackness, in which nothing could be seen.

"You think he is in his room?"

"I am not altogether sure."

"There does not seem to be any one there at present."

They peered up at the blank window, expectant. The greenish twilight deepened, and then, with a rush, darkness fell, cold and black. The villa seemed to hide itself in the night. Indeed, Torpichen could not see even the outline of the window until his eyes grew accustomed to the dark and a few stars came out to help.

Grazia suddenly touched his arm.

"What's that?" she whispered.

From somewhere came a strange, thin sound like the cry of a night bird, far off, seemingly, and yet distinct. After a moment it was repeated.

In the garden there was quiet. Hardly a leaf moved. Noiselessly Torpichen and the girl crept back among the bushes and waited there in hiding.

Again the bird's cry; but this time it was nearer—close at hand. Then, above, in the darkness of the window, a shadowy face showed, and a hand gesticulated. In an instant both hand and face disappeared.

For a while there was silence. It was broken by little footfalls and the rustling of leaves. Again the girl touched Torpichen's arm, signaling his attention.

Peering through the branches of a bush, they saw a small, crouching figure making its way cautiously toward the villa. It approached, halted, approached a little nearer, and stared up at the window.

The window was empty now; but presently a fat white face showed in it. Then something bulky and black was heaved up on the window ledge by unseen hands. Slowly it was lowered with a long rope toward the ground. Foot by foot it crept down, until the little figure in the garden, reaching up, could take it in his hands. Suddenly the rope came whirling down from above.

Torpichen could make out that the black object was a bag—leather, perhaps—a valise. There was a second during which the crouching figure bent over it, fumbling to release the rope. Precisely in that second Torpichen leaped upon him, beating him down by sheer weight of bone and muscle.

"Hold him fast!" Grazia cried, dashing forward.

But it had been easier to hold a wild cat, for the captive wriggled, twisted, and was gone. The bushes hardly swayed as he slipped through them noiselessly and vanished into the night.

Even as Torpichen struggled vainly with the writhing little man on the ground, from above came a terrified scream that ended in a gurgle, as if strong hands had throttled it down into a fat throat. A light flashed up in the room, showing the distorted face of Guido, as he reeled backward.

Some one leaned over the window sill. It was the hound-faced detective who had ridden to and fro with Torpichen.

"We've got our man!" he called down.

Lights flared out over the garden, and from right and left policemen came running, only to find Torpichen and Grazia tugging at the valise. The accomplice had made good his escape.

When he saw what had happened, the hound-faced man in the window gave tongue. It was a loud noise. Swinging out on the ledge, he dropped to the ground.

"Why the devil weren't you here?" he growled at his comrades. "What were you about? I told you to get him!"

"We did the best we could. You told us to keep back. The fellow was like an eel."

Refusing to argue, the hound-faced man jerked his fingers at a policeman and snapped out:

"Come on! I know him. We'll get him yet. I know where he's making for. Come on!" He set off running. "We'll take the sea road," he shouted.

They talked as they ran.

"It 'll be a long chase," the policeman said.

"It 'll last until I get him. He's the one man I want!"

"Did you see him?"

"No, but I heard his signal, and recognized it. I've had information connecting him with this case. He's been seen with that rascal Guido, and we've had our eye on him for some time—Ricci's orders."

"Then you know where he's going?"

"I could almost swear to it. Come on! We'll get him!"

Trail or trace there seemed none to the young policeman who followed the orders of the hound-faced detective; but in the man hunter there is an instinct that takes him out of himself and puts him on the right road, even though he runs in the dark.

It was dark enough now, and in the darkness there was more than a hint of storm—a storm cold and hostile to humanity. It seemed to be threatening somewhere in the depths of the dark sky, brooding somewhere over the sullen sea, waiting for its appointed hour to shatter the quiet of the world. It menaced the man hunters as they ran steadily over the dim road by the sea, but neither of them sensed it. They were driven on by the man-hunting instinct, indifferent to all else.

The mile became a second mile. They pressed on until they came to the Arma—the dry bed of a torrent now.

"You're making for the hill?"

"Yes—it's a chance, but some one answering his description has been seen slinking in and out of the ruins of Bussano."

They kept their breath for running, forcing their way up the stony path to the edge of the hill. Beyond lay the ruins of the old earthquake town. They had made good speed; but what speed had the fleet-footed little fugitive made—he who could call like a bird and leap like a wild cat?

They went slowly now, advancing craftily, pausing at the ruined city's walls, creeping stealthily among the shattered houses and gaping cellars. They heard nothing, saw nothing.

"Have you any idea where you're going?" inquired the young policeman dubiously, as he stopped a moment to rest.

"I have," retorted the hound-faced man curtly. "Follow me, and keep your wits about you. This isn't the first time I've been here!"

They finally came to the shell of a house—a mere house front with empty windows. Behind it was a cellar, cumbered with fallen masonry. The detective paused and listened. He could hear nothing but the vague whispering noises of the night and the almost imperceptible sounds made by the crumbling city as it sank down into deeper ruin.

Feeling his way, he crept on toward a corner of the cellar where a fragment of roof still hung precariously over the angle made by two cellar walls. His comrade went with him, step by step.

"This is the place!" the hound-faced detective whispered.

Silently as they had approached, it seemed as if quick ears had overheard them. A strange snarl, whimpering, yet defiant, greeted them. The detective flashed up his light.

Crouching in the corner lay a little red dog. His eyes shone wickedly in the reflected light, and he bared his teeth and growled. As the detective stooped to seize him, he darted away into the ruins.

Save for the dog, they found no trace of life in the lair, though there was evidence that it had not been long deserted. Footprints showed on the dusty ground—tiptoe marks, as of one who had come lightly in; and on the cellar floor lay a trowel, such as gardeners use.

"He's been here before us," the detective said. "Our only chance to capture him was to get here first."

"Who is he?"

The hound-faced man paid no heed to the young policeman's question. He sent the light of his torch to and fro over the welter of ruined masonry.

"The devil couldn't track a lost soul in here!" he grumbled. "There are a thousand hiding places."

"The dog was left on guard."

"Yes, and perhaps to warn him."

As if in answer to their speculation, there came from far away the yap and howl of the faithful little dog.

The detective picked up the trowel. Then he kneeled down and scanned the earthen floor of the cellar. Deep in the angle of the wall, where the red dog had crouched, the ground had been recently disturbed.

"Did he have time to hide something?" the policeman asked.

Without replying, the hound-faced man thrust the trowel in and dug at the loose earth. It came away easily. In a few moments he had opened up a cavity back under the foundation wall.

"Hold the light," he ordered.

Then, with both hands free, he dragged out a mass of decaying rags—earth-stained, time-stained, the color of dead and yellow flesh.

"Khaki rags — shirt, coat, breeches—they're all here!" he said, inspecting them rapidly and laying them aside.

Once more he peered into the excavation he had made. Something caught his eye. It looked like a fragment of lime-smeared rag. He lifted it gingerly. The rag rolled away, and on the palm of his hand lay a rotting finger.

The policeman, looking over his shoulder, laughed.

"I've seen such trinkets before," he said. "Finger of a dead man, eh? These hill folks think that if they carry the bone of a dead man with 'em, it 'll make 'em invisible. The idea is to let the flesh rot away from the bone between two new moons. I know all about it. I'm from Ormeo myself!"

The detective did not reply. He stared first at the khaki rags, then at the gruesome fragment of what had once been living flesh and bone.

Clothes that a vagabond might wear! A finger hacked away—and not so long ago—from a human hand! The hound-faced detective knew just what they had to do with each other, and he knew just what they were doing here.

He had followed the little thief, foiled in the jewel robbery, to this far-away lair in the ruins of Bussano. He had found the khaki rags of the vagabond, who was wanted for the murder of Prince Kurokin, and the finger cut from the victim's hand—the crooked finger that had once worn a ring of price.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "What a find!" Then, to his comrade: "Gather up those clothes, quick! We're off now!"

Suddenly he paused, and again brought the light to bear on the ghastly relic—a relic of crime and superstition—in his hand. For quite a minute he studied it, turning it from side to side. A puzzled look came into his face. His eyebrows were drawn down over startled eyes.

"God and the devil!" he whispered. "What is this? The crooked finger is *straight!*"

XX

THE *padre* came slowly from the house of the Jesuits. On the terrace in front of the chalet he paused and glanced down into the garden, where a few electric lights outlined the winding path. Otherwhere the darkness was intense and sullen.

"Is that you, Lucrezia?" he asked quietly.

A dozen paces away the tall old woman stood. She, too, was searching the silent garden with her old eyes.

"It is I—yes," she replied.

"Come here! What are you looking for down there?"

"Nothing."

"Where is that nephew of yours?"

"Beppo?"

"Who else but Beppo? It was chiefly for your sake I took him on, Lucrezia. He is giving us both cause to repent it. Where is he? For days now he has been away from his work, and for nights away from his bed. Do you know where he is?"

"How should I know? The curse of the hills is on him again. I thought he would escape it here under your shadow, *monsieur le baron,* but it is stronger than the church. The hills have called him back, and he has gone. God knows what he will find there. There are wilder and stronger things than poor Beppo in the hills."

"It is not the hill folk who have called him this time," the *padre* said, "or I should not so much care. Their wickedness is not wholly unclean, at any rate. Your Beppo is in a dirtier kind of wickedness. Hear this, Lucrezia—the other night I saw your Beppo coming from a wine shop—a bad kind of wine shop—with a man who is, I fear, a very great criminal. That man was Guido, who is butler up at the villa of the murder—you know, where the Russian prince was killed. I watched your Beppo and that man; and when the police magistrate was questioning Guido, I bethought me of Beppo and spoke his name."

"You, *monsieur le baron,* you?" the old woman cried fiercely. "Did you set the police on my poor wild Beppo?"

"No—I merely spoke his name that Guido might hear it."

"And what did Guido say?"

"What Guido said betrayed Beppo as well as himself."

"May the Virgin protect us!" the woman exclaimed. "That is why they came here, the police! One man questioned me—a detective with a long face like a dog. I told him nothing. What could I tell him? Beppo has nothing to do with your wine shop and your murderers. The hills have called him again—that is all!"

How much she really knew the *padre* could not determine. The wisdom of the old hill woman, who had suffered all things, was a match for the old priest, who had seen all things.

Suddenly Lucrezia cried out:

"Another! There's another of them coming here—coming for him!"

The *padre* made out some one walking up the steep garden path.

"No—that is my friend," he said. "I sent for him. You remember Mr. Forbess, who was our guest in the chalet for a while? Give us lights and fire there, Lucrezia. As for Beppo, if he comes back, tell him to come to me. Try and get word to him, if you can."

The *padre* advanced to meet the young man who came running up the steps to the terrace.

"You will pardon me for sending for you, Forbess, but I was anxious to see you to-night."

"It is a great pleasure, father," Forbess replied; "but why here?"

"Why did I ask you to come to the chalet, and not to our house? It may be that I wanted you to see the little place in a different mood. The last time, you know, your mood was—"

The young man laughed cheerfully.

"Never mind what my mood was then, father! You got me through the worst of it, and now it seems like a half forgotten dream."

"You are a happy man, Forbess!"

"I have won a lifetime of happiness in the last few days—more than enough for a lifetime!"

"I know, I know," the priest returned. "Mrs. Demdyke has told me. Nothing could be better. You are your father's son, and Betty is a good girl."

Betty a good girl! These pallid terms were not those in which Forbess thought of her. He saw in her more than woman—something as formidable as life, and as mysterious as sex, which called to him and would not let him go. It had been that way from the beginning, from the very first time he looked into her eyes. On a planet swarming with women he had to have just that one woman, and no other. The secrets of other women did not entice him; it was her secret that he must discover, if he was to know happiness. He was that kind of monogamistic man.

It was of some importance, though as yet he was unaware of it, that he and Betty Demdyke shared delight in the games of life—in tennis and golf and riding, and, above all, in the white yacht in which they had cruised through sunsets and moonlit nights. Seeking the woman of his midnight dreams and aspirations, he had found, as well, a playmate.

The *padre* spoke again when Forbess and he had entered the chalet and had drawn up chairs to the little fire.

"Yes—I had an object in asking you here, Forbess," he said; "but that can wait. It is Beppo that is in my mind now—Beppo, my gardener."

"I remember you were interested in his soul," Forbess said dryly; "but what has the rest of him been up to now?"

"I wish I knew! He has just wit enough to be dangerous to himself. He is not sufficiently intelligent to be a criminal, like that murdering vagabond. No," the *padre* continued thoughtfully, "Beppo has nothing but the crafty, animal intelligence of the hill folk. Wiser heads could easily make a tool of him."

"Guido, for instance. I've heard of that."

"Yes, Guido," the *padre* answered quickly. "Guido has been pulling my little Beppo about—there is no question of that; but who is pulling Guido? Did he merely betray his master into the hands of the murderer? Was he an active or only a passive accomplice?"

"I thought he had rather a sound alibi," Forbess suggested.

"Yes, that is true. He was in a wine shop on the night of the murder, and Beppo was there with him; but how long did they remain there? That fact has never been ascertained. You know what an alibi is—a conjectural thing based on half remembered impressions of time and place and faces. Assuming that it is all right, the fact remains that it is precisely the presence of Guido in the wine shop that links Guido with the crime at the villa. Do you see? And if Beppo was in any way linked to Guido, who was over Guido? Where was the end of the chain? Must we conclude that it was in the hands of that vagabond, who seems to have vanished as mysteriously as he came?"

"There wasn't much mystery about his arrival, was there?" Forbess remarked. "Andrew Torpichen brought him in. Of course, it was unintentional, but silly things like that aren't done."

"It was done that time," affirmed the *padre*, "and Mr. Torpichen is paying the price. No doubt he did not know that the fellow was hidden in his car, but all the same he has to pay—in suffering and anxiety, at least. You've nothing against him, Forbess?"

"Against Torpichen? No—nothing now. Poor devil!"

"He is as much a victim as any one else—the wretched prince, who was killed, the unhappy young woman, who was wounded, or my poor Beppo, who was tempted into the crime. Beppo again, eh? Well, Forbess, I think I am responsible for that wayward soul."

"I suppose that whatever he did, he did for money, father. The body was robbed of a large sum, I understand."

"Yes, some one got that money; and the prince's room was robbed of clothes, a gold-mounted traveling bag, and perhaps other things. Guido would not take articles of that kind. They were his charge. To take them would be a confession of his guilt; but my poor little Beppo? Just such gauds would tempt him. And there you are, Forbess!"

"Yes, father, there we are, just where we were."

"Not quite. It is clear enough who murdered Kurokin, and the lust for vengeance explains why his face was savagely battered in, almost beyond recognition; but who robbed the mutilated corpse? Who tore away the diamond ring, and the finger with it? That looks—and I know what the police think—like the savagery of the hill folk—like my poor, half animal little Beppo."

"They have accused him?"

"They are looking for him."

"And haven't got him?"

"Look for a ferret in the night—it is easy compared to finding Beppo. If he has taken to the stone cities and the hills," the *padre* said, "no one can find him."

"There is one exception to that, father. One man can!"

"Who?"

"You, father."

"It may be, it may be," the priest answered. For a while he was silent, staring reflectively into the fire. "Yes—I have an idea where to look for him; but I pray God the capture of that poor irresponsible wretch may be left to other hands than mine, Forbess," he concluded, with a sigh.

Again he was silent. Suddenly he started and sat erect in his chair, listening.

"What's that?" he asked, startled.

"What, father?"

"Didn't you hear something, Forbess? Listen!"

"Oh, that, father! This little house of yours is full of strange noises. The wind rumbles in the cellar, and things tumble about. It must be the wind, or your monastic rats; or perhaps it was in the street behind."

"No, no, Forbess — that didn't come from the street." The priest lifted a cautioning hand. "Listen! There it is again. It is in the cellar, underneath us."

The young man smiled at the *padre's* serious air.

"That's nothing," he said. "You should have heard the noise that I heard the first night you gave me hospitality here, father. I think I told you about it—a cry that pulled me to my feet. You said it must have come from the street behind the chalet."

"I remember; and you found the cellar empty?"

"There was no one there. It was just an empty cellar, walled up and empty. I discovered nothing—except, of course, as I told you at the time, that when I came up again I looked out of doors and thought I saw your Beppo slipping away."

"A cry in the night!" the *padre* mused reflectively.

"And Beppo—"

"Yes—in view of what has since happened, I think it may have been Beppo. I attached no importance to the circumstance at the time. I thought the cry came from a night brawl in the street, and that Beppo might naturally enough be prowling around, and out of his bed, when he was supposed to be in it. He sleeps here, you know—when he does sleep."

He stood up with sudden resolution.

"Come, Forbess! Bring that lamp. I'll take this one." The *padre* picked up the three-branched lamp, where tiny wicks flickered in oil-filled cups. "We'll go down into the cellar."

"What you'll find, I fear, will be rats and rubbish," Forbess answered; but he took a lamp and led the way into the kitchen.

He unlocked the heavy door and went down the stone steps.

"There's another way of coming down from the outside," the priest explained. "You see that door?"

"Yes—I examined it. It is barred, and the bars have rusted into the sockets."

As Forbess said, there was rubbish scattered about the floor—old wine flasks, broken baskets, pine cones. Stacked up against the back wall were orderly piles of olive logs.

"What is beyond that wall?" Forbess inquired.

"The street—the little stone lane that runs up the hill into the old town and out into the Berigo. It is level with the cellar.

Stay!" the priest added. "I remember now that there is another cellar beyond the wall—a little mule cellar, which used to open on the street direct, but I boarded it up years ago. There was a door. Where was it? Ah!"

He laid down the lamp he was carrying, and went toward the wall where the olive logs were stacked up in order. He thrust his big shoulder against the pile of wood, and sent it crashing to the floor. Then they saw the door—an old, old door of splintered wood and rusty iron. Through the gaping chinks a light shone.

Only for a second did they see the light, for almost before the wood had ceased falling it was quenched; but if they could see nothing more, they could hear, and what they heard was the noise of some one scrambling in the dark. That was what it sounded like.

"Who's there?" the *padre* shouted.

Without waiting for an answer, he threw himself against the door and drove it from its rusty hinges. Forbess held high his smoky lamp. They made out the outlines of the mule cellar; it was a small room, almost triangular, level with the lane behind the chalet.

On the floor lay a heap of tumbled blankets, and the contents of a gold-fitted dressing bag, scattered here and there, reflected the light from the quivering lamp. There were several pieces of furniture in the room —a commode, a table, and a couple of chairs. It was clearly to be seen that the cellar was used for a habitation.

"Don't you understand, Forbess? He has been living here—the vagabond, the assassin!"

Even as they advanced, picking their way, into the dingy mule cellar, the door beyond, which gave on the lane, swung quickly open, and through it two shadowy figures fled noiselessly—one to the left, the other to the right. The figure that darted down the lane to the right the *padre* recognized. It was Beppo.

"Quick!" he cried. "To the left—after him!"

Kilting his black robe, the old priest ran stoutly up the lane toward the old town. Forbess, having tossed away the brass lamp, took after him. The sky was heavy overhead, and the narrow, twisting streets were steeped in darkness.

They were hunting the unseen. They were chasing the unknown. They were guided only by the fleeing footsteps, padding on the cobblestones, turning now this way and now that; but the *padre*, who knew the devious streets of the old town as he knew the caverns of the human heart, pushed on without hesitation. Forbess set his pace to that of the priest, and it was a fast one, for the *padre's* legs and lungs were as stout as his courage.

Now and then they paused to listen, catching up the sound of the guiding footsteps. Then they carried on, through streets black as the storm-haunted night, touched here and there with the yellow glare of a street lamp at a corner—streets that climbed over bridges and crept under archways.

"We've lost him!" Forbess said. "I can't hear him!"

They had halted, listening. On one side was a stone wall. Tall houses, with doors and windows closed, lined the other side of the street.

"No matter," the *padre* answered breathlessly. "Let us keep straight on. There is only one way now, and I know where he is going."

They came out on a road that swept past a deep ravine. As yet Forbess did not understand.

"He's making straight for the Villa Corinte. This way!" cried the priest, and swung to one side.

It was not a path, but it was a possible way of descent over shale and shifting stones, and they plunged down it headlong, into the ravine. There, in the dry bed of the *torrente*, in the depths of the ravine, the darkness was so thick that it was almost palpable. They clutched blindly at the scrubby bushes as they tried to scramble up the other side, feeling their way. The old priest was laboring heavily, and now Forbess was in the lead.

"If God would only show a light!" the *padre* said.

As if in answer to the prayer of a righteous man, high overhead in the black sky two metallic clouds crashed together, and a blaze of lightning filled the heavens. For an instant night was day; and in the vivid light they saw the hunted man—the wild figure of a man poised on the broken wall of the evil villa, with arms outspread.

For an instant only—then sudden darkness obliterated him.

(*To be concluded in the February number of* MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE)

Men Are So Primitive

AND YET IT IS NOT ALWAYS EASY TO ANALYZE A MAN'S MOTIVES, WHETHER HE IS A MERCHANT OR A MOVIE ACTOR

By Du Vernet Rabell

TED JONES would never have called himself primitive. To begin with, it was a word he had probably never used in his life, and, to end with, it was the last thing he would have considered himself. "Primitive" has to do with prehistoric man, while Ted lived right in the now of life, and was the most up-to-the-minute young man for miles around.

As proof of this, take the store. That's the way Ted always spoke of it—the store. It was the offspring of his own fertile brain, and he had all the young father's inordinate pride in a thriving youngster.

It *was* a remarkable store to find in a place like Pottersville — Pottersville, with its dingy railway station, its frame business block, and its one main street. Margot Porter, who had just bought one of the big houses on the hill, stopped short in amazement when she crossed the threshold that first morning.

"Why, what a nice shop!" she exclaimed, looking about at the hothouse tomatoes, the tins of everything from baked beans to truffles, and the baskets of mushrooms—actually mushrooms!

Then Ted came in from the back of the store. She took one look at him, looked again, as if to make sure that she saw what she saw, and sat down suddenly.

"Good morning," she said, and her tone was actually faint.

"Good morning, Miss Porter," Ted responded brightly, taking in the well groomed figure.

Margot Porter was noticeable anywhere. She was a large woman in the middle thirties, with a *nez en trompette* and well brushed hair. If anything went wrong with the world, she gave you the impression that she could always be relied on to set it right.

Now, however, her customary poise seemed to have deserted her.

"How did you know my name?" she asked.

Ted smiled, with a flash of white teeth. Margot, still staring at him, blinked very rapidly.

"Oh, I know everybody's name! That's my business."

"Your business? Oh, I thought you owned the store—"

"I do," Ted explained. "What I meant was that I always know when there is a newcomer in the neighborhood. I find out all about them—not curiosity, you know, Miss Porter. As I said, it's my business," he went on. "I find out how they live, what they like, what they will want to buy; and when they come in—we have it!"

"How unique!" Margot said. She managed to drag her eyes from his face long enough for another glance about the store. "But of course it explains this shop."

"Yes—it's the answer, all right."

Ted looked at Margot shyly, boyishly, as if to discover whether her interest justified his enlarging on a subject so dear to him. Something in her intent silence must have reassured him.

"In the city people can get anything in the eating line almost all the year around. That's why the people who have places on the hill, and on the lake shore, didn't open their houses until June and then beat it back to town in September. Their own gardens couldn't feed them, and they couldn't buy the things they wanted in the stores around here. Of course, we have always had the neighborhood trade, but it's the people from the city who bring in the big money. They'll pay seventy cents a box for strawberries, and a dollar ten for mushrooms. All they ask is, 'Can you get them?' And we can, and do."

"And it was your idea?" Margot encouraged him.

All she asked at the minute was that this youth should stand there, the light shining full on him—on his clear olive skin, the perfectly chiseled lips, the smile, the dark velvet of his eyes. He was so tall, so lean-hipped, so beautifully put together!

Ted was nodding with youthful pride.

"Yes. Mother was scared at first, and I did run behind the first couple of months. A lot of stuff spoiled; but once the people from the big places found out that coming out of town in the spring, when it's so beautiful, and staying late in the fall, when it's more beautiful, didn't mean roughing it, as you might say, I began to make money."

Margot touched a luscious bunch of purple grapes.

"Do you ship these things up from the South?"

"Some, but most of it we grow."

Margot looked out of the window.

"But where?"

"In the hothouses. You may have noticed them down on the Willow Creek road. Marion Ames runs them for me."

"Is she in partnership, or is she a relative of yours?"

A slight flush mounted to the smooth olive cheeks of Ted Jones.

"No, she's not a relative—not exactly."

Margot, wise Margot Porter, whose business, whose very lucrative business, it was to know all the signs of the tender passion coming and going, nodded. Ted, after a half frown, laughed with a boyish unconcern. Then Margot got out her marketing list, and presently left the store.

While Ted was checking up the various articles, his mother came in.

"Who was that, dear?" she asked.

Ted looked up.

"That was Miss Porter—Margot Porter, the woman who writes for the movies."

Mrs. Jones was deeply interested.

"Oh, yes—the one whose salary is as big as the President's!"

"The same. And say, mother, she's going to be here all summer. I'll bet she has a house full all the time. She'll be worth a mint to us!"

"Do you suppose she'll have Monty Evans, or Celia Lee? Oh, Ted, do you suppose we'll see Constantine Favorelli, ever?"

"We might." He stopped suddenly. "Say, mother—what if she had Dorette Darling to visit? Say!"

II

Outside the store, Margot Porter standing with one foot on the step of her car, hesitated. She looked back at Ted Jones.

"We're not going home," she told the chauffeur. "Drive to New York — and make the best time you can without getting pinched!"

Once in New York she went directly to the Glendon-Hammerstein Studios, and was whisked up to the office floor. Margot Porter was a somebody—she was never kept waiting downstairs.

Glendon was glad to see her, as usual, but she hardly let him finish his greeting.

"Tell me," she began, "is it true about Favorelli?"

Glendon mopped his forehead. He was a pink little man, with a short neck and ginger-colored hair that grew in tufts, like sagebrush on the desert.

"A lot about Favorelli is true," he returned moodily.

"Oh, don't be cagy!" Margot snapped.

"Well, what do you want to know?" Glendon demanded.

"Is it true that he and Hammerstein are on the verge of a break?"

Glendon chuckled.

"Louis Hammerstein isn't breaking with anybody who means so much to him in money—not if he can help himself; but we are having a lot of trouble with Favorelli. He's fought with three of our best directors on the coast, and torn the script of his new picture to ribbons."

"Why?"

"Oh, he won't do this, and he won't do that. Fact is, Favorelli is losing interest in his work. He's made a bunch of money, but, at heart, he isn't one bit different from his pick-swinging brothers, even if he does wear spats and uses thirty-dollar-a-bottle toilet water. He wants to beat it back to sunny Italy and raise grapes, or olives, or just plain Hades—I don't know."

"Well, let him."

Margot leaned back in her chair. Glendon stared at her.

"Let him—and worth a half a million a year to us!"

"Let him go," Margot repeated.

"And where will we ever get another such gold mine?"

" Behind the counter of a grocery store up in Pottersville, New Jersey."

Margot tucked a straying hairpin back into her smooth hair, and smiled. Glendon waved his hand and snorted.

" Can the comic stuff, Margot—it isn't your line."

" I'm not being comic. Come and see for yourself."

Glendon reached for a cigar.

" Tell on, woman," he commanded.

Half an hour later Margot rose to go.

" Now, for Heaven's sake, don't slip up on this." Glendon's voice was eagerly anxious. " You'd better let me do it."

" My dear boy," Margot protested, " here's this kid who has never, in all probability, been a hundred miles from his home in his life — unsophisticated, unworldly—why, he'll be pie for me!"

So it was that one morning, two days after this interview, Margot, having finished giving Ted Jones her order, turned back from the door.

" Oh, Mr. Jones, will you do something for me?"

Ted hurried from behind the counter.

" Why, of course—anything, Miss Porter. Are you giving a dinner?"

" No, it's nothing like that." Margot smiled. " I just wanted to know if some day, when you can spare the time, you'd take me to your hothouses. You can't imagine how interested I am!"

Ted grinned.

" Say, isn't it funny the way things work out? Marion was saying only last night that she was crazy to meet you, and we were trying to dope out some way, so you wouldn't think we were fresh."

Margot laughed.

" Fine! When do we go?"

Ted thought briefly.

" Well, to-day is Wednesday. We close the store between one and three—"

" I'll be here at one. If you are not afraid of me as a chauffeur, I'd like to drive the car myself."

III

Margot Porter, her words to the contrary, was not one bit interested in the hothouses; but she was mightily interested in Marion Ames. What kind of a girl was she? How strong an oar did she pull with this young Ted Jones?

In other words, was she going to find an enemy or an ally in the girl that Ted was " going with "? Such was the information she had skillfully gleaned concerning Marion Ames in the past few days—that she and young Jones were " not what you might call engaged," but they had been " going together " for the past two years.

Marion Ames proved to be a soft-voiced, quiet-mannered young person, in a well fitting blue serge dress, with dark blue eyes behind amber-rimmed glasses. She showed them through the hothouses, but she let Ted do most of the talking. However, just before they left, she flowered a bit.

" Oh, Ted, the huckleberry bushes are doing fine," she said. " I'm so glad we tried them!"

" Huckleberries?" Margot asked in surprise. " Why, surely you don't need to grow huckleberries? The mountains must be full of them."

" But you people never get a chance at them," Ted laughed. " The kids from the mill down the valley strip the bushes before the berries are ripe; so this year we're growing some—a fancy kind. You can have your huckleberry pie and huckleberry roll as well as the folks in the mill."

He followed Marion down the long green aisle, sniffing the sweet, warm air.

" Gee, they smell nice, don't they? Sort of spicy—oriental."

On the way back to the store, Margot skillfully switched him from a new type of lettuce and the huckleberry bushes to the subject that had occupied her mind from the minute she had first laid eyes on him. She hadn't been able to get the " line " on Marion that she had expected to get, and she didn't want to lose time.

" Mr. Jones, have you ever thought of going into the moving pictures?"

Ted shot her a glance. At that sidewise shift of the eyes, so reminiscent of Favorelli, Margot exulted.

" Going into the moving picture business?" Ted repeated. Then he chortled. " Of course I haven't. I'm not such a fool as I look!"

" You don't look like a fool, my friend," Margot informed him. " Do you know who you look like? You look like Constantine Favorelli."

Ted laughed again.

" A couple of other people have told me that. Say, isn't that Favorelli fellow good?"

" H-m! Favorelli isn't as good as his eyes are bad."

"He sure has a bad pair of optics," Ted agreed. "I always like to hear the girls in the audience gasp when he rolls them sidewise."

"You have the same trick."

Ted frowned.

"Great snakes, Miss Porter, I haven't any eye tricks! What do you think I am?"

Margot brought the car to a stop, and turned to face him.

"I think you are a young man with a remarkable future. I think you are the logical successor of Constantine Favorelli. You have everything he has, and more. You have youth, ability, and enthusiasm."

"Oh, say, Miss Porter!" young Jones demurred. "I never had the slightest desire to go into the movies. I don't care much about them. After we close the store, I like to potter around in the garden, or to drive the flivver. Honestly, you've got me wrong!"

Margot adjusted her stiff collar and settled down to business. For half an hour she talked, while Ted, acceding to her request not to interrupt, listened in silence; but at the finish he shook his head.

"It sounds fine," he told her. "Of course, I'm not going to stay in Pottersville all my life—you needn't worry about that. I'm going to see the world, once I get the store where I can leave it; but now—no, thank you just the same, Miss Porter, but there's nothing doing."

Margot started her engine, deposited Ted in front of the store, and drove home. In such a daze was she that she all but ran into her own front gates.

"Well, Margot," she observed caustically, as she backed and continued up the drive, "you must write considerably better than you talk!"

At four o'clock she got Glendon on the telephone.

"Help!" she called.

"Well, spill it."

Glendon's voice clearly indicated that no bad news could surprise him.

"There's nothing to spill, except my tears. Constantine Favorelli the Second turned me down."

"Huh! I knew you'd ball it up. I'll be out to-morrow morning."

"You're wasting your time. That Jones lad doesn't know what ambition means. All he wants from life is huckleberries!"

"Ambition!" Glendon snorted. "Ambition—in this day and generation!"

"All right!" Margot retorted huffily. "You'll fare no better than I did."

"Money talks," Glendon returned tersely, and hung up the receiver.

IV

MARGOT expected that Glendon would appear the next morning, some time around noon. Then she would telephone Ted Jones and make an appointment, and she and Glendon would ally their forces and move upon him.

But Glendon had no such idea. Margot had done her worst, now let her keep out of it—that was his thought. As for anybody arranging an interview for *him!* All he would have to do would be to put in an appearance and reveal his identity. Then the crowds would scatter, and he and this young Jones would get down to cases.

In New York that is what would be pretty sure to happen; but in Pottersville, not necessarily so. Pottersville had been founded by the Dutch in 1742, and many of the descendants of the first settlers still lived there. New York, the moving picture industry, the great E. C. Glendon—what were these to them? Not much!

Glendon eased himself out of his car in Pottersville at ten o'clock—an ungodly hour for him. He walked into the store, discovered Ted, gaped involuntarily as the boy's startling good looks smote him, blandly announced who he was—and nothing happened.

Ted was affable enough, but at the moment he was talking with young Mrs. Grimes, who had experienced some difficulty with a box of gelatin purchased the day before. After his smiling nod in the general direction of Glendon, Ted bent again to the directions on the box which he and Mrs. Grimes were perusing.

"It's a new brand, but good," Ted was telling the lady. "Now did you follow the directions closely, Mrs. Grimes? Let's see —'soak in cold water'—"

"Cold water!" Mrs. Grimes said excitedly. "Does it say *cold* water?"

Much animated dialogue, and finally Mrs. Grimes, giggling, but satisfied, departed. Ted turned to the fuming Glendon.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, Mr. Glendon." He gave him a quick glance. "Did you say your name was Glendon? You don't belong around here, do you?" he inquired with interest.

"Lord, no!"

Ted laughed, and drew forward his order pad.

"Now what's it to be?"

The frown between Glendon's eyes smoothed itself out as he looked at Ted's alert, boyish face.

"Oh, I don't want to buy anything!"

He pushed his card across the counter, and swelled like a frog. That *he* should have to identify himself—and to a young hick in a country grocery store!

"Oh, yes!" Ted nodded. "The moving picture business! Say, Mr. Glendon, we've got somebody else in your line out here—Miss Margot Porter. Know her?"

"I ought to," replied Glendon. "Now what I came up for—"

"Just a minute."

The telephone was shrilling, and Ted dashed away.

Before he came back from taking an order that covered two pages of his book, Glendon had come to the conclusion that the whole human race ate too much; but in due time Ted was once more leaning sociably over the counter.

"Now, then, Mr. Glendon?"

Glendon settled himself on an inadequate stool.

"Mr. Jones," he began impressively, "what is your idea of the moving picture industry?"

Ted's dark eyes wandered out through the window, where Glendon's high-powered foreign car stood purring in the road.

"I think there's money in it," he replied.

"I get you!" Glendon tapped Ted's arm. "But, my boy, a car like that one is only a drop in the bucket. It's not the men at my end of the game who make the money. It's the actors."

The door banged open, and a portly soul bearing a basket ambled in.

"Morning, Ted!"

"Good morning, Mr. Sibley," Ted replied, "Mrs. Sibley isn't sick, is she?"

"No—she's doing up pie plant. That's why I'm marketing. Here's the list."

Ted took it and ran his eye down the paper. Then he looked up.

"Oh, Mr. Glendon, meet Mr. Sibley. Mr. Sibley is our postmaster. Mr. Glendon is in the movies," he explained.

Mr. Sibley deposited his basket on the counter, and squinted.

"Is that so, now? Don't seem to recognize your face—and I thought I knew 'em all. Comedy, are you?"

Glendon fought apoplexy, and at length found his voice.

"No—I'm in the office end."

Sibley at once lost interest. Turning back to Ted, he engaged him in lengthy confab regarding the advisability of setting out peach trees in April.

"Some say February is the best time," he concluded.

Ted was moving with a sort of greased rapidity from barrels to boxes, and to the shelves behind the counter. He listened and he talked, but he kept on the jump; and it really wasn't the hour that Glendon believed it was before he had the order filled, and Sibley out of the store.

But by this time the place had filled—half a dozen women, three chauffeurs, with lists in their hands, and two garrulous old men, who were busying themselves with somebody's genealogy. Ted called for some one named Mart. A sallow-faced youth with a wart on the bridge of his nose put in an appearance, and took some of the business off the proprietor's shoulders.

It was after eleven when Ted could finally devote some attention to Mr. Glendon.

"Here, have a fan," he offered solicitously. "You look hot. Good morning, Mrs. Van Broecken! Mart will wait on you."

Glendon clutched Ted's arm, and words leaped from his throat.

"Mr. Jones, I'm a busy man myself, and time means money to me. I'm prepared to make you an offer that will interest you. You belong in the moving pictures—"

"Great snakes!" cried Ted. "You're the second person in two days—"

There was an unexpected interruption.

"Is this gentleman in the moving picture business?" Mrs. Van Broecken put down her string bag, full of groceries, on the counter. "Now this is luck! My son Frank has written a scenario. It's better than anything I ever saw—I'll say that for it. It's—"

"Excuse me, madam, but I have nothing to do with the scenario department." Glendon bounced about and faced Ted. "Young man, is there any place where we can talk—privately?"

Ted smiled soothingly on the evidently piqued Mrs. Van Broecken, and nodded toward the rear of the store.

"Why, yes—come right along."

Among the tinware, spades, and lawn mowers, Glendon had his say.

"Now, then, Mr. Jones," he finished. "How about it?"

Ted smiled.

"Nothing doing."

Glendon's jaw fell ajar. Then his eyes narrowed.

"The figures I mentioned are just rough. We might—"

"Oh, it isn't the money—"

"Oh, come now, Mr. Jones! Money is something we're all after."

"Yes, but you see I'm making money now—good money."

When Glendon departed, he all but stumbled down the steps to his car.

"Blind, deaf—and nutty!" he was muttering. He roused himself. "Drive over to the station. I want to telephone."

A train was just pulling in. The first person to step off stopped suddenly, opened her wide eyes, and then waved a small, excited hand.

"Why, Mr. Glendon!"

Glendon had stopped too.

"Hello, Dorette!"

Dorette Darling shook her finger at him. "Naughty boy! I believe you've been up to something. You don't seem one bit pleased to see me. I've come to spend the week-end with Margot."

Glendon was leading her to his car.

"Never mind, never mind! My dear child," he added fervently, "when a shipwrecked mariner sights a floating spar, he does not question how it happened to be in his neighborhood!"

V

GLENDON drove Dorette Darling up to Margot's, and stayed for luncheon. Margot got out of him the story of his interview with young Ted Jones, and her active imagination filled in the details which he omitted. She nearly laughed herself into hysterics, and finally Glendon himself managed a wry sort of grin.

"Of course, we can afford to laugh now." He beamed at Dorette, who pouted.

"Well, I don't know as I'm so crazy about the part you've given me. Here I'm to get this kid—and he'll probably pig the whole film!"

Glendon was quick to nip this threatened rebellion.

"Now, that will be all. Just remember this, Dorette—you're young, you film well, and you can follow a director's instructions, but as yet you're only a comer. 'The Desire of the Desert' is your chance, but you can't swing it alone."

Dorette considered this. Appearances to the contrary, she had something more than a cream puff for a brain.

"But watch your step," the clever Margot cautioned. "Don't pull any of the ordinary vamp stuff on this boy—he's wise!"

Dorette's short upper lip curved in a wicked little smile.

"Have no fear. I know the line—I was born in a hick town myself!"

Ted took Marion Ames riding that night. He told her, the first thing, about Glendon's visit to the store.

"You didn't accept his offer, did you?" Marion's blue eyes were anxious.

"I did not. There is nothing in that game for me."

"And that offer he made you wasn't so big," Marion added quickly. "I've heard these big stars, like Monty Evans and Walter Humphrey, make a thousand a week."

"When they make it," Ted replied sagely; "but they are always fighting with their companies; and if a picture doesn't go, it affects their next contract. It's not sure money."

"No, indeed," Marion agreed. "It's not like your business—people always have to eat. I should hate to think of you going out to Hollywood. Look at the stories you hear about that place!"

"Oh, the stories—half that is newspaper talk, I guess."

"I don't know. Even a newspaper has to have something to start with." Marion looked up at him shyly. "I'd be worried about you. Somebody might steal you away from me!"

"Not a chance!"

VI

WHAT do young people talk about in the course of "getting acquainted"? Nobody knows, and then no two ever talk about the same things.

Dorette Darling and Ted Jones began by talking about huckleberries. The way Dorette could eat a huckleberry that seemed too big for her little three-cornered mouth, was art—a performance enticing to watch, and to think about afterward. Ted thought about it afterward — about the soft red mouth, and the little white teeth, and the blue eyes, and the curling lashes that shadowed them, like willow fringes over a dancing stream. Ted fancied this comparison, which he had thought up himself.

And then, too, the way Dorette had of saying:

"Really? Oh, do tell me some more, Mr. Jones!"

The summer drifted along on the wings of warm, garden-scented winds. Before anybody realized it, the grapes were purpling in the arbors, and the hills and roadsides were bright with goldenrod. Dorette Darling spent practically the whole summer with Margot Porter, and, no matter what she thought about it, neither Margot nor Glendon considered her time wasted. There were moments when Glendon waxed impatient, but he had taken shrewd note of the cut of Ted's jaw, and realized that here was a situation that couldn't be rushed.

Ted himself had never had such a prosperous summer. He planned an addition to the store and the hothouses.

"Miss Porter has sure done an awful lot for this town," he told Marion one night, when they were sitting on her porch.

She nodded.

"Yes. My goodness, those friends of hers must all be awfully rich! And most of them made their money from the moving pictures."

"We never thought anything of the old Dutch houses around here, did we?" Ted said. "Except that they were nice and roomy, and that our folks had always lived in them. Then along comes this bunch and goes crazy about them, and they sell like hot cakes!"

"And look at the money that's been spent fixing them up—hardwood floors, bathrooms, new water systems. Ted, there must be millions in the movie business!"

The moon floated from behind the big black walnut tree. It shone full on Ted's well shaped head, as smooth as a seal's, on his straight nose and clean-cut chin.

Marion bent forward and regarded him deliberately. For a long time she was silent. Then she said:

"Ted, do you know that you're awfully handsome?"

Ted was busy packing his pipe.

"Rats!" he observed, when this operation was finished. He leaned his head back against Marion's knee. "But I'm glad you think so, if it makes you love me better. Does it?"

His tone was lazy rather than ardent.

"I suppose so. Girls like a handsome man. The girls would be crazy about you on the screen. They'd write you notes. Miss Porter told me these young screen stars use the notes girls write them to boost their salaries."

"Good idea!"

"You know, Ted," Marion went on slowly, as if feeling her way along a road she was not at all sure of, "these young fellows make tremendous incomes. I knew they made money, but—" She put her capable-looking hand on Ted's shoulder. "Ted, why don't you go into the movies?"

"Because I don't want to."

Ted blew a smoke ring, and interestedly watched it drift into the moon's rays.

"But, Ted, think of the money you'd make!"

"I'm making money now, and I'm going to make more. Say, you know what I've been thinking of? A chain of stores!"

Marion didn't let him finish.

"But what do you want to be a storekeeper for, when you could be a movie king?"

Ted glanced at his watch, and rose.

"Where's the comparison there?" he asked.

He slipped his arms about Marion, and kissed her; and for the moment her argument departed from her mind. She was young—and the moon, and the scented summer night, and all!

As Ted settled himself behind the wheel of his car, he sighed. Then, catching himself at this, he frowned. The day before little Dorette Darling had placed her rose petal of a hand for one brief, fleeting moment on his throat—and the place she touched had burned for twenty-four hours. He could feel it even now. Why didn't the touch of Marion's hand—why, even when he kissed her—

He shut off the engine, and sat staring straight in front of him.

At four o'clock in the morning his mother heard him come out of his room.

"Ted," she called, "what's the matter, dear? Are you sick?"

"No—I'm going down to the lake to swim. It's too hot to sleep."

VII

THE next afternoon Dorette had a visitor. She seated the caller in the summerhouse, and said she would run in and get Margot Porter.

"No, don't," Marion Ames said. "I want to talk to you."

Dorette looked scared.

"About Ted," Marion added purposefully, and Dorette looked more scared.

That night, at dinner, she faced Glendon and Margot across the coffee cups, and didn't look scared at all.

"I'm going to quit," she announced. "I feel like a skunk."

If a soft, furry little rabbit had come lunging out of his burrow, all growls and claws, Margot and Glendon could not have been more dumfounded.

"What's biting you?" Glendon asked.

Dorette told him.

"And," she finished, "you can imagine how I felt. Here we are planning to steal her man—because she won't have a look in, once he gets out in Hollywood—and she comes and begs me—*begs* me, mind you—to use my influence to get that kid into the movies."

Dorette put her bright head down among the Sèvres cups, and wept. Glendon rose to his feet, but Margot's warning glance was unnecessary. He knew when to unleash the dogs of war, and when to play the diplomat.

"But, dear child," he said, in the voice of a cooing dove, "you have invested this idea with all sorts of trimmings it doesn't really possess. You talk as if we were villains. Why, we're thinking of this boy's future—"

Dorette jerked up her head.

"Can that—with me! Just because I have a short upper lip and dimples, everybody plays me for a simpleton."

Glendon lit a fresh cigar and leaned forward. He talked very kindly, his voice was mild enough, but the meaning of his words was unmistakably clear.

The little Dorette listened to him, gulped once or twice, dabbed her eyes, and presently rose.

"All right!" she said limply. "I'll go through. I'm no welsher. I know all you've done for me, Mr. Glendon, and if this is my chance to balance my account I'll take it. But"—she rolled her handkerchief into a tight wet ball—"but, gee, if we could only look ahead when we contract debts—girls especially!"

As Dorette had declared, she was no welsher. Incidentally, she was no fool. She had declared that, too.

The next afternoon, Ted Jones took her motoring. He didn't know exactly how this had come about, in the busiest part of a busy Saturday; but here he was sitting beside Dorette, with the car stopped in a shady spot overlooking the lake.

There was a marked change in Dorette's manner. Gone were the insouciance, the provocative gurgles, the follow-me flash of her eyes, and the gestures that always made Ted think of fluttering white butterflies. Now she was all business.

"Mr. Jones," she began, "I'm going away to-morrow, and it would be a poor return for all your many kindnesses to me this summer if I did not speak to you about your future."

"I didn't know you were going away," Ted said sharply.

Dorette ignored this.

"As you know," she continued evenly, "the moving picture industry offers exceptional opportunities to a young man endowed as you are. Frankly, you would have a very successful career ahead of you."

She met Ted's dark eyes, and her own slipped away. Ted was plainly endeavoring to smile, but he wasn't making much of a success of it.

"It seems funny to hear you talk like that—so authoritatively—when you are so little and so young. Yet everybody knows how successful you are."

Dorette laughed—a beautiful bit of laughter, like a well trained brook.

"Yes, I'm successful. Everybody knows who I am, how much money I make; but here is something they don't know—that I work eighteen hours a day, and can't call my soul my own!"

Ted looked interested.

"Is it work? Is it, really? That side never occurred to me. It seemed like play."

"Play! You ought to come out to Hollywood, and work on a big picture like 'The Desire of the Desert.' You'd see how much you'd play!"

Ted snapped a twig that he had been fingering.

"That's your new picture, isn't it? That's why you're going away?"

Dorette nodded.

"Yes—and it's the picture Glendon had in mind for you."

Ted started.

"Your picture! He never told me that!"

" Would it have made any difference if he had? No, no I didn't mean that!"

Ted looked down at her.

" I—I guess it would," he said slowly.

Dorette straightened.

" Of course, you mustn't forget this," she hurried on nervously. " A picture like that means work, and leading a totally different life from any you ever lived. It means facing conditions—"

Suddenly Ted interrupted her slightly breathless recital.

" Look here! Are you trying to paint this game of yours in glowing colors, or are you trying to scare me off? Dorette, just what are you trying to do?"

Dorette's throat was pulsating like a bird's.

" I don't know," she whispered.

" There's something here I don't understand," Ted said. He took hold of Dorette's shoulders, and turned her around, very gently, so that she faced him. " You're going to Hollywood, aren't you? Now do you or don't you want me out there? Look at me, please!"

Dorette raised her eyelids as if they were weighted.

" I—don't—I—do—oh, please let me out! There's Mr. Glendon—he'll drive me home!"

Marion Ames learned from Ted, that night, that he and Dorette Darling had had a talk. Ted didn't say what they had talked about, but Marion felt that she could guess. She settled Ted with one of her father's best cigars and a pillow at his back. Then she began to talk to him, smoothly, reasonably, convincingly.

" It's your chance," she finished.

" Is it?"

Ted's tone was dull.

" It certainly is," Marion told him impatiently. " I'm surprised that an up-and-doing boy, as you have always prided yourself on being, can't see it. Why, it would be play for you—"

" There you're wrong. It's hard work."

" But you could do it. You think you could, don't you?"

Marion's voice took on a note of quick anxiety.

" Well, there's mighty few things I haven't been able to do, once I got down to it. A cinch never interested me."

" But you're interested now?" Marion cut in quickly.

There was a long silence. From the shadowy grove of beech trees a sleepy bird twittered, and at once the branches began to move, as if to rock him back to sleep. Ted lifted his head to stare at nothing.

" Yes—I'm interested."

There was a touch of grim humor at the corners of his mouth. He didn't meet Marion's eyes; and later, when they said good night, he didn't kiss her. Then he came back from the car and snatched her in his arms.

" Why, what's the matter?" Marion asked. " You act so queer—sort of scared—"

" Oh, this whole thing is so—"

" It's big," Marion said. " That's why I talked you into it. I'm looking ahead."

Ted was looking ahead, too. That is, one minute he was trying to look ahead, and the next he would slam the door of his mind, refusing all promptings to analyze his unruly emotions.

VIII

In October Ted Jones was " working " in Hollywood. That's what Margot Porter and Glendon called it, but it didn't seem like working to Ted. The boy wanted to work. He wanted to work so hard that he would have no time to think. He didn't find his thoughts pleasant company; but, work or not, his days were well filled.

He learned to ride a horse, to fence, to box, and to swim. Of course, he had always been a swimmer of the hole-under-the-bridge variety, but now he learned the crawl stroke and the trudgeon. He learned to stand on a spring board, flex his straight young back, and dive, and to do all sorts of fancy stunts.

He learned to wear clothes—no, " wear " is not the word. He made them part of himself—even a morning coat and pearl gray spats. Deep in his boyish heart, Ted took rather kindly to sartorial adornments. When a dress suit became evening clothes to him, he had a vague feeling that he had " arrived."

" But you are wrong about it being work," he told Dorette one evening, when he had dropped in to see her. " It's like a game. I'd be ashamed to sign a contract and get paid for playing it!"

Unaccountably, the contract that Glendon had had ready for weeks had not been signed. That's one reason why Dorette Darling was still in the picture.

"Be on hand when he gets homesick," Glendon had instructed her. "Listen sympathetically when he babbles of the beets."

"Oh, you'll call it work all right, once the novelty wears off," she told Ted now.

The little screen artist leaned forward to pluck a purple iris. She was sitting on a marble bench beside a sunken pool, and Ted was sprawled at her feet. He twisted about to laugh up at her.

"My child, you don't know what work means. Work means getting up in the morning at sunrise, going all day, planting, watching things grow, picking them, selling them, pleasing folks, and tumbling in to bed at night—tired! Not dog tired, like I get out here, but sleepy tired."

"Day in and day out, no change—did you like it, really?"

Ted nodded.

"You can't have too much of a good thing." He leaned back and stared up into the new moon. "It's March—planting time back home. We're getting things out in the frames. I'm old-fashioned—that's the Dutch in me. I wait for the new moon to plant."

Dorette moved restlessly on the bench.

"But Miss Ames will be looking out for things, won't she?"

"Yes, but I like to do things myself. Gee, how I'd like to be sitting in Marion's parlor this minute, having a good talk about things!"

"Would you?"

Dorette's tone was lifeless. Ted looked at her fluffy lace dress, her drooping hat, and her blue eyes, shadowed by those dream-troubling lashes. He touched her hand.

"It sounds crazy, doesn't it—to you?"

Dorette linked her small hands together.

"I don't know. They say places hold us. I read somewhere:

> "Places hold one—in bright weather,
> Caught up in heavenly tether,
> I should see the willowed edges
> Of a brook with sunburned sedges,
> Leap and lightly pass
> On brown tufts of crinkly grass."

Ted had caught a fold of her skirt.

"Dorette, how funny that you should know anything like that!"

"Funny?" she repeated listlessly.

"I never thought a thing like that would appeal to you." He rose to his knees. "Dorette, does it?"

Dorette looked down at the smooth, dark head. For an instant her small hand fluttered over it, a lost butterfly, but it did not alight.

IX

That week they began work on "The Desire of the Desert"—try-outs, tentative filming. As the days went on, Glendon, Margot Porter, and Hugh Wyatt, who was directing the picture, began to show concern.

"All right up to the love scenes," was Margot's comment.

"He makes love like a wooden Indian," Glendon added irritably.

"Oh, he'll come along all right," Wyatt reassured them, even after a particularly arduous hour with Ted. "That's the hardest part of the work, at first, to a he-man like Jones. Do you remember the trouble we had with Chipping, the golf champion?"

And Ted did seem to improve, until one morning Glendon, who was idly watching him read a letter that had just been handed to him, saw the boy start, and the color slowly drain from his cheeks.

"What is it?" Glendon asked quickly. "Not bad news, I hope?"

Ted folded the letter, put it in his pocket, took it out again, and finally tore it to tiny bits. He was smiling, but Glendon, wise as he was, could make nothing of his smile, and his eyes were like live coals.

"It's news," he said slowly; "bad, or not—I don't know. A friend of mine has just been married. You remember Miss Ames? She ran away and married Frank Van Broecken. He drives a taxi."

"She looked as if she had more sense," replied Glendon, trying to keep his voice equable.

Ted laughed aloud.

"Oh, she has sense, all right—Marion has. She's done very well for herself. Frank has just had a scenario accepted, and she writes she thinks the money, the big money, is in that end of the game."

"Well, here's a fine kettle of fish!" Glendon exploded to Margot Porter, his face pink with consternation. "Here this lad was just getting good, and his girl gives him the go-by!"

"That Ames girl? She's thrown him down? You're sure?"

Margot's voice held a ring of excitement.

"Yes—she eloped with a hack driver, it seems. Why are you looking so pleased?"

"Get your contract ready for Ted. Shoot his big scene with Dorette to-morrow. Everything's all right!"

"Everything is all right?" Glendon repeated scornfully. "Say, I know these temperamental screen stars!"

Margot patted him on the shoulder.

"That boy hasn't an ounce of temperament in his make-up."

"When the girl you love—"

"Ring off!" Margot interrupted blithely. "Ted Jones hasn't been in love with Marion Ames for four months. He's mad over Dorette. After that love scene—the moon-bathed roof of an Arab house—soft cushions—the whisper of music—oriental perfume—enter the young sheik—Dorette in that chiffon robe—why, once he has her in his arms—all right! My dear Glendon, the game is finished! We win!"

The next morning Glendon stood beside the director and watched the shooting of a couple of minor scenes.

"All right, Jones," Wyatt called presently. "Come, Dorette! We'll go through this once."

As Glendon watched, his eyes — jaded, sophisticated eyes that had watched the rise and wane of many a movie star—gradually began to glow.

"Gad!" he exulted, as Ted, moving like a panther, dragged Dorette into his arms. "The women are going to eat that!"

Then, suddenly, he frowned. For a second he watched, then touched Wyatt on the shoulder.

"Look at Jones!" he said.

Wyatt's lips were tight. He signaled the camera man, and the clicking of the crank ceased. Ted, his face half buried in Dorette's hair, looked up.

"Say!" Glendon burst out irascibly. "What do you think you're doing? What's the idea of wiggling your nose like that? Is that your notion of registering passionate love? God, you look like a rabbit scenting a cabbage patch!"

Ted was staring down at Dorette's head, which still lay on his breast.

"It's her hair—that perfume," he muttered. "You—you fellows will have to let me off for to-day. I'm all shot to pieces!"

With this he stumbled by the amazed company, and vanished. Glendon was positively stuttering.

"What's all this about your hair? What did he mean by that?" He crossed to Dorette and sniffed her tresses. "Sort of heady, but smells all right to me."

Dorette's eyes were round.

"It's a new perfume. Margot gave it to me. She called it *élixir d'amour*."

Glendon went up like a rocket.

"Margot! Yes—she was the one who said this bird Jones had no temperament!"

Dorette Darling spent a restless day. She spent most of it driving about the streets of Hollywood in her little car. When she passed any of Ted's customary haunts, she almost stopped; but she caught never a glimpse of him. About nine o'clock, looking decidedly frightened, but still determined, she took a road out of town which she and Ted had often followed, to a woodsy place through which ran a small stream. Sure enough, here she found Ted.

He hardly noticed her at first. His eyes were far-focused, as if intent on vision that only he could see.

"I had to find you," Dorette began breathlessly. "I feel as if everything was my fault; but when Margot gave me that perfume, how could I know—and even yet I don't see—"

Ted looked at her.

"That perfume—oh, gee!"

He was sitting behind the wheel of his car, and now he dropped his head down on his outspread arms. Dorette climbed in and sat down beside him.

"I guess it wasn't altogether the perfume," she hazarded gently. There was a yearning sweetness in her blue eyes. "I'm so sorry—about Miss Ames, you know. It isn't much to say you're sorry, but it's all—"

"Oh, that!" Dorette had to bend forward to hear him. "It wasn't that. It was the perfume. Good Lord, Dorette—oh, it smelled just like huckleberries!"

"Huckleberries—and at fifty dollars an ounce!"

"It reminded me—of home."

There was a long silence. Overhead, night drew aside the curtain of fleecy clouds, proudly to show the world the young moon nestled in her cradle. A soft, warm wind wandered among the tree tops, and the brook sang a love song to the flowers that leaned low to listen.

Presently Dorette turned to Ted. His head was still buried in his arms, but between his arms and the wheel was a space. Dorette eyed it calculatingly. Then she deliberately inserted her curly head in the space, followed by as much of her small self as she could manage to squeeze in.

"Teddy!" she whispered. "Speaking of home—oh, Teddy, *dear!* How strong you are!"

X

GLENDON felt that the time had come to make a stand. The next morning, when Ted appeared in his office, his attitude was distinctly offish; and even the friendly Margot looked exceedingly grave.

"So you've come back!"

Glendon lit a cigar and puffed forth an angry cloud of smoke. Ted grinned.

"Yes, I have—for good."

Glendon's eyes narrowed to cautious slits.

"What do you mean by that?"

Margot was looking at Dorette, who wore her happiness like a primrose wreath upon her brow.

"Ted means he's ready to sign up," she said quickly.

Glendon whipped the contract from the top drawer; but Ted held up his hand.

"No—not that contract!" He sat down on the edge of the desk. "Now, Mr. Glendon, I don't want you to feel that I'm holding you up, but business is business, and here's my proposition."

Glendon sat up, bristling.

Ted knew what he wanted, and he stated it with no loss of words.

"Considering everything," he finished, "a thousand a week will be all right."

"To start with," Dorette slipped in cooingly, her adoring eyes fixed on Ted.

Glendon shot her a venomous glance. This was her *work*—or was it? Ted was a young man who kept his eyes and ears wide open during all his waking hours, and Hollywood soon taught a man the market value of dark eyes, square shoulders, and a flashing smile.

However, Glendon didn't see why he should take all this lying down.

"You're crazy!" he told Ted.

That young man shook his head.

"Not me! I leave that to the artists in the game. I'm just a business man."

"We'll wait a day or so," Glendon stalled.

"Why?"

Glendon chewed on his cigar, and meditated unhappily upon the whole moving picture game. Presently he jabbed at a button.

"I want Higsby," he ordered. Then he turned back to Ted. "God knows *you* don't need a lawyer—you're pretty good at highbinding yourself!"

Late that same afternoon, Margot Porter sat in the office alone with Glendon. She was running her eyes over the contract in her hand, down to Ted's signature at the bottom, plain and devoid of flourishes.

"I feel years younger with this signed." She sighed contentedly. "Right up to the minute when you handed him the pen, I wasn't one bit sure we'd land him. After that flash of temperament yesterday at the studio—"

Glendon swung around in his chair.

"That wasn't a flash of temperament. It was a flash of financial genius. Jones let us see how good he was, and then faded, to give us time to figure out how much he was worth."

"But Dorette said he was so homesick that—oh, what if he had bolted back?"

"They don't go back," Glendon snorted. "Once these hicks hit Hollywood, once they start handling the real green, pampering the pie plant ceases to mean anything to them!"

"Just the same, with Dorette encouraging him to talk about home all the time, and that line of hers about coming from a small town herself—"

"She did—that's why she's off 'em for life. She wouldn't let him go back."

Margot rose.

"But, of course, what really got Ted in the end is what always gets your man of real spirit — the thrill of attainment, the fires of ambition—"

"Huh! Put that in a script!" Glendon settled his neck down into his collar. "You can take this from me, Margot—what got this Jones is what gets 'em all—a pretty girl, natural vanity, and the money he's going to drag down."

There was a pause. Then Margot smiled.

"He was telling me that as a side line he's going to raise huckleberries. That in this climate—"

"Aw, tell that to the press agent!" Glendon shut his world-weary eyes. "In six months that vegetable vender will be raising the usual crop—mostly hell!"

Margot eyed him frowningly.

"Oh, men!" she said disgustedly. "Men are so primitive!"

The Twentieth Time

HOW A SORELY TRIED WIFE PROVED HERSELF A PEARL AMONG WOMEN

By Gilbert W. Gabriel

THEY all laughed at it. It must be a good enough story, to make them all laugh like that. She herself had laughed at it the first time she heard it. She laughed along now because the others laughed, and she did not want them to suspect how much Charlie annoyed her by telling it. Annoyed her? Tortured, rather!

"Well, good people, I want to tell you about a friend of mine—perfect gentleman and all that—who traveled for the Goodtruck people. Once, when he was in a Pullman, he happened to stick his head out into the aisle, and—"

He always began it like that. There was never the slightest deviation. She had begun to suspect, by now, that he had learned it by heart. He knew just where to pause, too, and how long, for his laughs; and they always came. That was the most exasperating part of it. It was the sort of story that treads all over the real wit and repartee of an evening, and leaves everybody flattened out in lazy good humor.

He was very handsome—which, she told herself after four months, is why she had married him. She had reached the stage of self-examination. Seventeen repetitions of that story in her presence in four months had forced her into it.

The seventeen times did not include a few scattered occasions when they had been merely engaged. She had not begun counting repetitions, then. It was on the strength of that story that she made up her mind to marry him. She had liked other men—witty and fastidious men, too—and never married them; but at the Hollands' house party, one dull noonday, he had leaped into the breach of a silence in a handsome, energetic, and earnest way.

"Well, good people," he had begun, "I want to tell you about a friend of mine—"

And immediately the force of him, the expansive good will, had worked wonders. Two nights later he was telling her of his success at selling Himmeldorf magnetos—and she was listening.

After they were engaged, and he was on exhibition to all her friends and relatives, it may have surprised her to hear the first set of repetitions, but it did not trouble her. This business of going out to Aunt Hattie's or Second Cousin Sig's to show him and his table manners off was stupid, at best. He made the best of it by telling them, very genially, when lulls obtruded:

"Well, good people—"

She had been grateful for his patience and perseverance. Aunt Hattie had straightway spread around the family the assurance that he was a whole vaudeville show, and Cousin Sig had increased his wedding present by six cups and saucers.

"Poor, dear boy," she thought, "telling it over and over for my sake!"

But on the honeymoon — they had stopped off at the Grand Cañon on the way to Himmelville, the brand-new city that Himmeldorf magnetos had built up out of nothing—he told it to her again—to her alone, mind you!

They were leaning over the rail at El Tovar, looking down into the infinite fantasy of colored crag and twilight distances. Far below them an eagle was circling to the sun-stained river.

"Well, honey bunch," he began, "I want to tell you about a friend of mine—perfect gentleman and all that—"

She looked around quickly. There was no one else in sight.

"Goodtruck people. Once, when—"

It was to her, just to her, he was telling it. She stared at him.

"Why, Charlie—"

Leaning on the rail with his square, resolute shoulders, he went on gazing down and reciting. His voice, vibrant with ardor, galloped out across the immensity of open gulfs, pronouncing a new benediction over all their splendors. The sunset sheeted his earnest face with the same glory that the cliffs proclaimed. He was magnificent!

"Stuck his head out into the aisle—"

Silent and unprotesting, she heard it through. It seemed to her like the saga of her caveman. How well he told it! How unerringly! When he paused at the right places, she managed to supply the right amounts of laughter. When he finished, she came close to him; but even as he threw his arm around her, she murmured:

"One!"

She had begun to count the times.

She had been bred by Meredith to believe that anecdotes are only second-class wit. She prided herself on a sense of humor, and had enough of that precious gift never to display her pride in it. She reveled in Shaw and Wilde and Rochefoucauld. The touch and go of pun and parley had been the chief exhilaration of her young life. Other maidens might be Joan of Arc, Florence Nightingale, or Susanne Lenglen. She had always dreamed herself another Mme. de Staël, stretched out in a *chaise longue* with bare toes, filling the luxurious air around her with scintillant epigrams and sallies.

When they came back to their newly furnished apartment, she straightway bought a print of Whistler's mother and hung it between the twin beds. Charlie, and all of Charlie's folks—whom he urged to come and see them often, now they had found the way—were touched by the sentiment.

She almost explained to one of them that it was because the dear, placid old lady had mothered the man who wrote "The Gentle Art of Making Enemies"; but she did not, because, that evening, when they were all at table, Charlie told the story again—the third time, that was—and they all laughed.

The next day she wrote a sonnet — a barbed and wicked piece of neatness—and sent it to her favorite newspaper columnist. She had been a giddy contributor in her day, and under her own name, too. This, of course, had to hide its bitter light beneath a *nom de plume*. It was about a new Andromeda, a lady wedded to an anecdote.

When it was printed, she left a copy of the paper folded cannily on Charlie's chiffonier. He took the paper to bed, turned to the sporting page, and fell asleep over it.

In the taxi, coming back from the Spences' dinner party — the eighth time, that was—she steeled herself to remonstrate with him. She loved him too dearly to fall back on sarcasm or insinuation. She wanted to tell him plainly—to have it out; but the taxi window played leapfrog with street lights that disclosed his face and added radiance to its liveliness.

"Charlie," she began, "that story of yours—you've told it so often, dear!"

"Gosh, yes," he exulted, "and it always gets a laugh. It's a cuckoo!"

A lurch of the taxi threw her against Charlie's manly chest. Quivering, silenced, she remained there.

The next night Charlie told it again.

Once more, and the times counted ten. There was a summariness, a finality to the decimal number. It ended a decade of spiritual cruelty inflicted by the Goodtruck people and the Pullman aisle. It began a new era which stretched off into middle age, old age, senility, with millions of milestones of that anecdote along the way. It told her the utter uselessness of plea or protest against that friend of Charlie's—the perfect gentleman and all that—and plunged her secret soul into a vow.

Nine times more she would allow him. No more than that, she vowed! On the twentieth time she would leave him. She would leave him, his name, his house and bed and board, forever.

II

By the fifteenth time it had taken on the ghastliness of habit. It had become a druggish sedative to her ears. If she did not hear it every few days, her nerves would grow taut against the tarrying of an inevitability, as flesh rebels against a whip's delay. When he sprang it, it was the springing of a gallows trap, the "finis" scrawled beneath another chapter.

At the sixteenth repetition—they were at the breakfast table with her father and mother, for whom, as Charlie put it, the latch string was always out—she almost overturned the coffeepot because he told about "an acquaintance of mine," instead of "a friend"; but when her parents laughed and beamed across their eggy toast at precisely the right moments, her own smile took on all the gelid ambiguity of a Mona Lisa's. Four times more, and—

He turned a bridge game into a hilarious rout, a few nights thereafter. She sat staring at the back of her cards. There was a lithograph on them, entitled " Love's Sweet Dream." Three times more!

On the Hollands' tennis court, the next week-end, he broke up a game of mixed doubles with it.

Two days later, in the brittle anxiety of a hospital anteroom, where they were waiting, amid Benson's relatives, to hear whether Benson—Charlie's friend, his chief on the Himmeldorf sales force—would survive the operation, he strove manfully, and succeeded. He genuinely, earnestly succeeded. Even Mrs. Benson, on the brink of widowhood, lifted her wan face into the carbolic-tainted atmosphere, and smiled at the right moments. She smiled at Charlie miraculously, and his wife, and did not hear her inward groan. None of them heard it. None of them, Charlie least of all, realized that it was the nineteenth time!

Charlie went to business unusually early the next day. In Benson's absence he was temporarily in charge of the sales force.

By nine o'clock she had packed a suit case with necessaries, and had put it back in waiting in the closet. She sobbed as she locked it.

She thought that when the time came—and come it must—she would want to take away with her something of Charlie's—something that she could have with her always, wherever she wandered—something that would express Charlie at his best—some little token that would be Charlie, all Charlie, next to her frozen heart.

She began to rummage his chiffonier; and in the collar button drawer she found a half page torn from an old issue of the *Magneto Monthly,* featuring a department headed: " Snappy Sniggers for Salesmen." There was a circle penciled, midway of one column, around a square of type:

> Well, good reader, I want to tell you about a friend of mine—perfect gentleman and all that—who traveled—

Word for word! If there were tears remaining in her eyes, they must have steamed away before the blaze that filled them now. Word for word, throughout; and under it, in italics:

> *Try that one when all else fails. It's a cuckoo!*

She flung herself back toward her bed. She had learned the worst. She had struck the secret mine of all his witlessness, his infamy. She abhorred him, she fleered and flayed him. She brought her feet up, pitched her arm across the pillow, and lay back, as if in a *chaise longue,* regally, disdainfully, flinging imaginary acid drops of banter out upon the gale of her long laughter. What would be the use, though, of raillery against a breast stuffed with " Snappy Sniggers "?

From the wall above her Whistler's gentle mother murmured:

" Now, my dear, you really mustn't—"

And, quite unlike a Mme. de Staël, she reached over for her manicuring things and heard the snarl of the nail file comfort her, over and again:

" One time more, one time more."

III

SHE waited whole weeks for that last time. She waited for her release with raw, jumpy nerves. She had been rash enough to think that it would be a swift one. She had been galled because Charlie had not taken advantage of the gathering at Benson's funeral; but Charlie was magnificently distressed, serious, worried, nowadays. Fate teased, and kept its hand behind its back.

Charlie worked hard down town, gathered expressive lines to his forehead, and came home too late and too tired for company. They stayed in the city during hot week-ends, while he intrenched himself in the front room behind charts, reports, and stacks of back numbers of the *Magneto Monthly.* When she saw how hard he worked, in what a pallor and perspiration, she would sometimes be filled with a perverse, impulsive pity. Once she started to come in and sit beside him.

" Want something, honey bunch?" he asked, looking up from Volume VI, No. 3.

She stopped short. She had seen the cover of it. She shook her head calmly and went out again.

The great Himmeldorf came on from Himmelville to settle the matter of a new local sales chief. Benson had been all right in his way, but the new man must have personality—personality, as well as efficiency. Himmeldorf had written as much to the temporary sales chief. His secretary had carefully included the " temporary " in the address.

Charlie had not labored in vain. Mr. Himmeldorf, on a first tour of the sales rooms, complimented him on his efficiency. He liked Charlie's looks. He accepted an earnest invitation to dine with Charlie and his wife at a famous roof garden.

She had Charlie's evening clothes waiting for him when he came home—even his collar buttons. She would be stanch and unflinching toward her little wifely duties—so long as she was his wife.

Dinner with Mr. Himmeldorf! At last, the inevitable moment would arrive! The lash, the release, at last! This would be the dénouement of the tragedy into which fate had thrust her.

She went steadily on with the business of Charlie's links and studs. A falling tear raised a white welt on the shirt bosom. She was glad the vest would cover it. He must look handsome, to-night of all nights.

When he was home and dressed, he did indeed look handsome. To the usual force and liveliness of his face there was added, now, a fierce and almost neurotic tensity—the pallid, ingrowing fervor of a man of affairs, the desperate instability of an only temporary sales chief. Poor boy, he had cut his chin a little in shaving. His bath had chilled him, he complained, and he shivered often in the taxi, *en route* for the hotel, despite the oily warmth of the metropolitan dusk.

They were meeting Mr. Himmeldorf in the lobby. She wondered how long it would be before Charlie would—

Not that it mattered; but she wondered whether he would pop it out while they were waiting for the elevator, or whether he would hold it in store for dessert and cigars. It was only after he had told it that she would be inexorable. Until then, she owed him all fair play. He had worked so hard! She owed him all her tact and wits, and he should have them. She would do all in her power to make the evening sparkling, memorably delicious.

When they were at table with Mr. Himmeldorf, she realized the fearfulness of that resolve. The great man was hot and tired out. His bulk oozed lethargy all down the back of his Palm Beach suit, and his brain had melted down into his red, resentful chins. He said "yes" and "no"—and mostly "no"—and eyed them, over his iced dishes, with the grumpy eye of an employer who is figuring the cost to himself of his employee's dinner jacket.

He was unmoved by the music, the sights, and the scents of the famous roof garden. Himmelville already had roof gardens, too. He looked out over the city, the cañons of clangor, the lighted windows and lighted cars.

"I can tell you to a dot how many of them use the Himmeldorf magneto," Charlie volunteered hoarsely.

"Of course you can," was the dumpy reply.

And, even so, Charlie did. Every now and then his wife tried loyally to turn a power plant or two into a happy thought, an automobile manufactory into refreshing persiflage. Mr. Himmeldorf stared back with an oozy, weary, suspicious stare.

Halfway through the meal she glanced across at Charlie. He was a sorry, greenish sight. He fidgeted, almost twitched, under the strain of the realization of the failure of the meal, the blank treason of personality. The fool! Why didn't he—

She began anew, pertly, prettily, on Mr. Himmeldorf. She compromised. She recited a foolish little piece of verse for them—something she had written for her favorite columnist, long ago. Charlie grinned at it, patted her hand. The great Himmeldorf munched moodily on.

Dessert and cigars! The end—the end of Charlie's hopes! Why didn't he—

"*When all else fails—*"

She looked up suddenly into the ruin stamped on Charlie's face, and heard her own voice, foolishly tiny, far away in the pinkish sky:

"Charlie, dear, do tell Mr. Himmeldorf that story—you know, about your friend—your friend from the Goodtruck people!"

IV

She was dragging her suit case out of the closet, tumbling things out to find her laciest nightgown. They were both giddy with Himmeldorf's good night promises.

Charlie was indulging in that reflective mood which falls upon successful men as they undress.

"I'll tell you, honey bunch," he said, "that old joke's all right; but a joke's a joke. I came across a bird the other day, about a fellow that traveled for the U. S. M. people—friend of mine, you understand—and he was on the Albany night boat, and he happened to put his head over the rail—"

When he was through, she said, humbly and adoringly:

"That's a cuckoo!"

Decent Things

THE STORY OF AN INTERESTING SOCIAL EXPERIMENT

By Edgar Franklin

Author of " Regular People," " A Noise in Newboro," etc.

XXV

HAVING undertaken to offer Mary a golden bridge for her withdrawal from the Valmer household, Mr. Fayles carefully considered the most diplomatic method of approaching his task. Despite Dinsmore's unpleasant suggestion, there were to be no little slips this time.

The most unfrequented spot in the house at this hour—where was that? The safest guess seemed to be the conservatory which Edith, some years ago, had fancied she must have. Stephen Valmer had built it for her, and now perhaps once a week one or another of the family went in there for an hour or two. Mr. Fayles turned his steps in that direction, switched on a cluster of lights, and rang for Barton.

" Er—all out of cigars, apparently," he said lazily, from the wicker rocker in the far corner. " Send Mary in with a couple, will you?"

" I'll bring them myself, sir."

" Send Mary with them, I said!" snapped Mr. Fayles.

The butler departed, with his chin somewhat elevated. Mr. Fayles looked around and grinned. This was just the place. Quiet, soothing atmosphere—all that! He glanced up with a disarming smile as Mary appeared with her tiny silver tray, set it on the stand beside him, and turned away again.

" Oh, Mary!" he said gently.

" Well?"

" The cigars were just a blind. I'd like a little interview with you."

" Thank you, sir, but I don't care—"

" Oh, but this is a different kind of interview, Mary," said the soft voice. " You'll find this one without any objectionable features. In fact, I'll venture to say that you'll find it one of the pleasantest interviews of your whole life. I mean that, Mary!"

" Well?" said Stephen's specimen, and paused warily, ten feet away.

" In the first place, I want to beg your pardon for that other little talk we had—for my end of it. I shouldn't have gone at you as I did."

" Oh, that, Mr. Fayles!"

Mary smiled deprecatingly. The strong suggestion of contempt caused Fayles to flush a trifle, and his voice to grow a bit sharper.

" I was angry, of course. I apologize. Mary, it is still necessary for you to leave, you know."

" Is that all you wish to say, sir?" asked Mary, and took another step.

" No, it's not, confound it! I'm prepared now to make your departure rather attractive to you. If you're out of here for good by noon to-morrow, I'll give you five —thousand—dollars!"

" Oh!" said Mary, and a disgusted little hand went up in protest.

" Not enough, eh? All right! I'll go the limit, and have done with the haggling. Ten thousand, Mary! Can you leave before breakfast?"

" No!"

" Then—er—when?"

" I shall not leave!"

" Oh, but look here, Mary," smiled Mr. Fayles. " That's ridiculous, you know. Ten thousand dollars isn't—well, wait! Don't run off like that! Mary, it is absolutely imperative that you should go. I'll dig in and make a contribution of my own. We'll call it twenty thousand dollars, if you're out before breakfast."

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Something flickered momentarily in Mary's eye—and died out completely.

"Well? That clinches it, eh?" said Mr. Fayles.

"No, that doesn't clinch it, sir."

Ina's husband swallowed and turned a trifle paler.

"Mary, it's a crazy thing to do, but I offer you the enormous sum of twenty-five thousand dollars in cash—I'll pay it to you at my office in New York to-morrow morning—if you'll vanish forever."

He took heart suddenly, for the mysterious flicker was again in evidence. Mary was breathing fast, too. By the grace of a kind Heaven, thought Fayles, Mary had fallen at last!

The light was dying again.

"That, indirectly, is Mr. Valmer's money?" she said.

"Some of it, probably. What do you care whose money—" Fayles began rashly.

Miss Allers stiffened. One almost sensed the dropping of the temperature all about her.

"May I go now, sir?" said she. "I'm helping Barton in the pantry."

"You're not refusing twenty-five thousand dollars?"

Mary smiled faintly—much, it is to be assumed, as a fanatic might smile while being lashed to the stake.

"Mr. Fayles, do you know the meaning of principle?" she asked.

"*What?*"

"No, you don't!" Mary concluded, half aloud, and added: "I beg pardon, of course, for saying that, sir."

"*Mary!*" gasped Mr. Fayles furiously, as his temples began to hammer.

Mary did not pause in her exit.

XXVI

THEY rose as Henry reappeared, did his wife and the Dinsmores. They were ready to cheer, softly but aloud, at the very first sign.

They did not cheer. Mr. Fayles was white, and his eye glinted. He walked across the room and paused, glaring out into the darkness beyond the pane. He turned and looked them over silently.

Ina shuddered.

"Oh! *You're* in a temper now, too!" escaped her.

Only Mr. Dinsmore remained wholly unimpressed.

"Funniest thing about Mary—seems to get every one in a temper, first or last, eh?" he observed. "Gad! No reason for the suppressed fury this time, is there? Twenty-five thousand turned the trick, and—"

"No!" Mr. Fayles said vibrantly.

"Then you—you didn't make her the offer, after all?"

"Yes!"

"And she—she refused to go, even for that?" Ina asked sharply.

"Yes!"

Mr. Dinsmore, grinning, shook his head.

"I say, ain't Mary the most peculiar little devil?" he said. "Just what did she say, Henry? How the deuce—"

"Damn what she said! Damn *her!*" the baffled Mr. Fayles roared suddenly. "I'll get her yet, I tell you! I—"

"Henry!" pleaded his wife. "Hush!"

"I will!" thundered Mr. Fayles, still more violently. "I will, if I have to hire thugs and have her massacred! No gutter rat like that can smirk at me and—"

"*Henry!*" Ina cried in agony. "Father'll hear! Father'll hear you, and—oh, is that door shut? Is it locked? Wells, you quiet him, won't you? Henry! Henry, dear!"

Mary, meanwhile, was not smirking. Whatever the saccharine blankness of her countenance at other times, it expressed much, as soon as she was safe within her plain little room at the rear of the top floor. At that very moment, in fact, Mary was weeping.

Grotesque as it all might be, she felt sure that she was right. She asked no sympathy, no help, no anything from anybody, save to be allowed to pursue her course—the path of her manifest duty—in peace. Instead—well, she had gone over all that with herself, time and again, and every time she came to the conclusion that she was doing the one possible thing.

But she was so terribly, so hideously, alone! This, presumably, was the cause of her tears. She could go to Stephen Valmer, did she feel so inclined, and make her little plea for simple justice. Stephen would probably communicate his sentiments to his family in characteristic fashion —and after that, if there was a single lurking atom of friendly feeling toward her in the heart of one of them, it would have been destroyed.

In all the endless ages she had spent here since coming down from her pretty dream at Mrs. Fairson's, she had seen just one purely friendly face — Jimmy Hammond's; and he had come and gone. Mary, who had almost ceased her weeping, sobbed afresh.

She was entirely calm in the morning, however, and worked along mechanically. Stephen Valmer paused for a little chat with her, and she found herself writhing under his gaze. If only he had selected somebody else on that first visit to the Mors establishment—Jenny, or the plump little Buck girl, or any one else! Then Mary could have found happiness and the " decent things " that she wanted in a more conventional way, for she would have become acquainted with—well, with men like Jimmy Hammond, for there must be more of them, and—well, then, with Jimmy Hammond himself, if the small, inner voice insisted on putting it that way!

He was well favored and well read. Eventually he would travel far; but, more than either of these things, he was—Jimmy Hammond. Mary paused in her labors and gazed mournfully through the great open door of the home. She also sighed heavily —and caught herself sighing, and frowned for an instant.

What under the sun was the cause of this monumental depression? Ordinarily, the whole situation here should have appealed to her as one vast joke—Stephen Valmer, and his disturbed family, and her own cap and apron, and all; but they did not so appeal.

One doesn't fall in love with a man after one five-minute chat, even if he has been lurking in the depths of one's consciousness for three years or more. No, one doesn't do that, for—Mary's lips parted, and a queer, low little cry escaped her.

This time it was pure fancy, born somehow of the impression Jimmy Hammond had made upon her brain while walking toward the house, just like this, farther down the very same drive. She could have sworn that he had disappeared just then behind the bushes at the turn. She looked away—she looked back again to the spot where a flesh-and-blood Jimmy Hammond should have reappeared by this time.

He was there!

Yes, and he had seen her, and had stopped short in his tracks. There was the queerest hint of a frown just giving way to a glorified smile of utter wonder, and then Mr. Hammond had bounded into motion. He was taking the five steps to the veranda in two jumps—and now he had stopped again before her, gaping.

" My Lord! *I've found you again!*" he choked.

Mary merely looked up at him. Mr. Hammond swayed a little.

" You—were you working here before, when—no, you weren't! You were a guest! They said so — you told me so! Mary! Are you *you?*"

Just here Mary's lower lip began to quiver. So did the rest of Mary's slender young body.

" Yes, I'm—me!" she said weakly and ungrammatically.

Ridiculous tears were welling from her eyes. With a sudden access of fierceness, Mr. Hammond's black, suspicious stare swept the whole place—and swooped back upon Mary and ceased to be black.

" What's the matter? Has anybody been hurting you?" he demanded. " Because, if they have I'll—I'll—why, *Mary!*" concluded the young man.

He reached for Mary Allers and gathered her into his great arms. Further, he did this in the most matter-of-course way, just as if it were his right.

Mary failed entirely of any resistance to the embrace, also in the most matter-of course way.

" Why, you poor little kid! What's the matter?" Mr. Hammond demanded.

In some way one of Mary's arms had contrived to pass around his neck. She was looking up into his face.

" Don't—don't go away from me again!" she said irresponsibly. " You're the only—"

" Go away from you? You bet I won't!" said the young man fervently. " Try to get away from *me,* Mary!"

" I—I don't want to! Jimmy, I'm—just the same as you. I mean, I really am a factory girl, just as you're a—a factory worker. It was all wrong! No, you don't understand, I know, but—"

The piteous quality of her voice appeared to steady the young man to a remarkable degree.

" I don't have to understand more than one thing, Mary," said he, " and that is that I've got you again, and that—that I love you! Ridiculous, when we're hardly acquainted, perhaps, but, Mary, there hasn't been a day or a night for three years when you've been out of my mind! There hasn't been—oh, Mary, *I've found you!*" he concluded rapturously.

There, at the head of the veranda steps, out in the open, where all the world might see, he kissed Mary. Specifically, he kissed her just eight times. Then, with a soul-shaking sigh, he drew back and looked down upon her.

"You—you *do* love me, don't you?" he breathed.

"Oh, Jimmy!" said Mary Allers.

Little birds twittered fittingly. The gentle morning breeze caressed them in this ecstatic moment. John smiled suddenly.

"Well, Mary, whatever you are, or whatever you were, I hate to do it, but it has to be done sooner or later, I suppose. I must tell you that my name isn't Jimmy Hammond. It's John Valmer. I'm Uncle Stephen's wayward nephew."

"You—" Mary cried faintly.

"Wait! Your eye informs me that it makes a great difference. Well, it does not, Mary. I assure you that your eye is wrong. We'll talk it out later. You'll be at liberty to file all the objections that occur to you, and I'll override them one by one. Never let this one fact escape you, honey—now, and after we're nicely acquainted, and forever after that to the end of time, you're mine! You're going to marry me!"

Stephen's nephew stated this with overwhelming energy. Mary suddenly smiled and came even a little closer to him.

"I don't care who you are or what you are, just so that you're you!" she said.

In the middle of kiss number four of the second series, Dinsmore's voice floated into paradise:

"Well, my—my—my word!"

They whirled to face him, Mary quite scarlet, young Mr. Valmer grinning very broadly.

"Oh, hello, Wells! You had to butt in, eh? My future wife—Mr. Dinsmore!"

"Your — what's that?" gasped Edith's husband.

"My wife of the extremely near future, Wells!" John repeated.

"Well, but—oh, I say! That's remarkable! That's—that's incredible!" sputtered Mr. Dinsmore.

He turned suddenly, and tottered into the house.

"Oh, I say, Edith! Edith! I say—oh, there you are, Edith! Come out here—you, too, Ina! I say—*look!*"

They looked. They started back. They paused, and stared again.

"His future wife, you know!" Mr. Dinsmore babbled. "Going to marry him, Mary is!"

"*Really?*" Ina cried.

"You never saw anything realer than this since the day you were born, Ina!" young Mr. Valmer said pleasantly. "No congratulations?"

Mrs. Fayles had a trick of grasping fundamentals in rather short order. Just a moment longer she hesitated, while her startled brain found its gait again. Then she advanced swiftly, beaming.

"Congratulations? Indeed there are, for both of you!" she cried. "I don't know how ever it came about, of course, but it's lovely! Why, this is perfectly wonderful!" she exclaimed, in a burst of candor, which quite missed John.

"Isn't it, though?" demanded Mr. Dinsmore. "Won't old Henry be tickled when he gets home to-night, eh? Just think! Only last night—"

"And I want to add my congratulations," Edith said, hastily and very loudly, as she swooped down upon the pair and even kissed Mary's cheek impulsively. "Mary, I hope you're the happiest little creature in the world—always!"

"I say, here's father!" shouted her husband. "I say, father, what do you think? John, you know—and Mary, here! They—they're announcing their engagement out here on the veranda!"

"What—what are they doing?" Stephen stuttered, as he appeared. "They — are you back again, John?"

Young Mr. Valmer's grin extended almost from ear to ear.

"Uncle, I am!" he confessed radiantly. "I came back this time to ask you for four hundred thousand dollars of my own money."

"*Hey?*"

"Yes! I wanted to invest it in looking for Mary—and I found her without ever touching it," said John, with a great laugh. "It's sudden, I know, and maybe a little bit surprising, but—we're going to be married, uncle!"

A rather dazed hand passed twice before Stephen's eyes. Then he was himself again—rather breathless and uncertain, but still himself.

"If you're asking my quite unnecessary approval, Johnny, you have it!" he said very heartily. " You couldn't have found a lovelier girl in the whole country, or a better one. As for you, Mary, you're almost as fortunate, I verily believe. John's impetuous and a little bit wrong-headed, but he'll outgrow those things, and—"

" He's not!" Mary corrected. " He's just—just right!"

She clung to John. John clung to her. Stephen, chattering along quite excitedly as the full import of the situation impressed itself upon him, wrung their hands. The little birds went on with their twittering, and ineradicable smiles seemed to be everywhere. There were sighs, too—sighs of relief—and a great peace came upon that gathering.

" Most astonishing thing, from any standpoint! Not astonishing, though, when one considers the — the amazing destiny that seems to work—" Stephen was saying, with no one paying much attention. He stopped, and squinted down the drive. " Who's that?"

Edith glanced just once.

" Some one to see one of the servants, evidently. Why on earth doesn't Dwight teach them that their visitors must come around by the garage?"

" Well, whoever she may be, she's in trouble," Stephen muttered. " She seems to be crying, doesn't she?"

" Their friends do seem to be in trouble of one sort or another, most of the time," Mrs. Dinsmore said. She spoke unsympathetically, since the chiefest of her own troubles had melted away at last. " She—what's wrong, Jack?"

" Why, that's Jenny Ross!" cried young Mr. Valmer, and — surely for no reason, since no reason existed—he turned bright red.

" Some one you know?" his uncle asked sharply, staring at him.

" Girl who works down in our factory. What in the name of common sense ever brings her up here?"

" Well, I say, old man! She's looking at *you!*" remarked Mr. Dinsmore, with some animation. " She's looking at you as if you'd stuck a knife in her!"

" Jenny!" cried Mary Allers, as Miss Ross, head down, handkerchief pressed to her lips, shoulders shaking, came doggedly to the steps—came doggedly, silently, up the steps and stood before them.

" Jenny!" said Mary again, and would have started toward her, but that the handkerchief came down suddenly, and Miss Ross's very effective eyes suddenly flamed in her direction.

" I don't want nothin' to do with you!" the visitor cried fiercely. " You—you get your hands off *him!*"

" What—"

" You get your hands off him!" Miss Ross shrilled. " He's mine! He belongs to me!"

There is a pretty and well observed rule to the general effect that no gentleman may sit while a lady is standing. Wells Dinsmore had passed his whole life in polite circles, and breaches of etiquette on his part were very rare indeed; yet now, with a crash, Mr. Dinsmore sat down in the chair just behind him.

Nor were the others much less affected. Stephen, for an instant, swayed almost as if under a physical blow. Ina gasped aloud, while her sister, with the strangest little whine, caught at her arm and steadied herself. Only John retained a small measure of calm as he turned on Jenny.

" What d'ye mean by that rot?" he inquired. " What do you mean by coming here and—"

" What do I mean? What do I *mean?*" Jenny shrieked. " My Gawd! Who has a better right to be where you are than I have? Jimmy, how can you stand there an' say that to me? How can you do it, Jimmy, after what you an' me have been to each other?"

" After what?" Mary cried, and suddenly shrank away from John.

" Say, that's a lie!" John exploded. " I tell you—"

" Oh, no! That ain't no lie! You don't need to look so horrified, my fine lady!" the visitor pursued hysterically, directly at Mary. " He can tell you the truth if he wants to—ask him! You can't take him away from *me!* You can't! He's goin' to marry me!" choked Miss Ross. " He—he's got to marry me!" she ended, raising her voice to a shriek.

" Oh!" came thinly from the very depths of Mary's being.

" Are you—saying that John—" Stephen essayed thickly.

" Is that his name—John?" said Jenny, quiveringly now. " I don't even know what's his right name, but I—I loved him! I know that! An' I love him now, an' I'll make him a good wife. Aw, Jimmy, what did you do it for? What did you lie to me for? D'you want to kill me? D'you want to ditch me, Jimmy? She's got you vamped, Jimmy, but—"

"Hey! Stop it!" shouted young Mr. Valmer.

"A-a-ah—o-o-oh!" observed Miss Ross, and the sound resembled that of a wounded animal.

"I don't know just what started this," John went on hurriedly. "It's beyond me. I never suspected that you were capable of anything of this kind for spite—if that's what it is; but I do know, and you know, and I want to assure every one here, that I'm as absolutely innocent as—"

"You! Innocent! Innocent!" screamed Miss Ross wildly, and wrung her hands. "Listen, Jimmy! You played with me! You lied to me! You threw me down—and now you dast to stand there an' look at me an' say you never—oh! Well, I got you now, anyhow! I had my suspicions you wasn't what you said. I had 'em quite some time, Jimmy. I thought you was workin' there for—for just why you *was* workin' there. I followed you to-day when you left the shop. I come up on the same train with you, an' I'm here now, an' I'm here to tell the whole world—"

"Young woman," said Stephen, "be silent for a moment!"

"Be silent! Be silent!" Jennie echoed. She clasped her bosom and laughed terribly. "I'm to be silent and let *him*—"

"Once more, be silent!" the master of the house commanded. There was about him just now much of the quality which, once upon a time, had caused truculent sea captains to subside suddenly. "Whatever your wrongs may be, they shall be righted. I promise you that, as a Valmer, and Valmer promises are kept. John, telephone Penning and say that I want him here at once!"

"But before I do that, I want to say—"

"Telephone Penning!" Stephen vibrated.

Not too certainly, John hurried into the house. Stephen turned upon Jenny, who seemed also to have fallen under the spell of his authority.

"As for you, I shall neither commiserate nor condemn at the moment," he said crisply. "I give you full assurance that you will be dealt with fairly, to the uttermost length. Now, please go!"

"Aw, well, say, listen! You couldn't get away with that stuff in a million years," Jenny said. "I get him right—I get him where I want him—and then I should lay off it an' just beat it! Huh! Watch me! Say, when a poor workin' girl—"

"Do you wish me to accept John's word and become your enemy, or do you wish to accept my assurance of fair play, and go?" Stephen asked.

Miss Ross's keen eye darted at him for an instant.

"If I go without startin' nothin' more—"

"Jenkins!" Stephen called, and held up a hand to stay the light wagon just rounding the house. "This young lady—to the station!"

The station wagon rolled away, with Jenny Ross in the rear seat, her handkerchief still pressed to her lips, and five dazed, numbed pairs of eyes fixed upon her until she vanished.

XXVII

Stephen's voice came first. Somewhat unsteadily, he turned toward the door again.

"When Penning comes, send him to me immediately. I shall be in the library."

He went into the house.

Second after second, the hush remained quite unbroken, although Dinsmore was beginning to mutter. With a mighty effort, then, Mary forced herself into motion and turned, her lips tight, into the doorway. She all but collided with young Mr. Valmer, hurrying out.

"Now, when the lawyer gets here, little Miss Ross," he began furiously, "you and I will thrash this out, and—where is she?"

"She — she's — gone, old chap!" said Dinsmore. "Popped in—did her hellish work — popped out again! Nice-lookin' kid, too, I will admit," he added, and chuckled. "Always a mystery to me why you insisted on factory work, but if there's more like her, I—"

"Say, if you're talking to me, you're running a terrible chance of having your infernal face punched straight through the back of your empty skull!" young Mr. Valmer shouted. "Get that, and dry up! Mary!"

"May I pass, please?"

"May you what?"

"I wish to return to my work," stated a small voice that bore no resemblance to Mary's.

"You come back here and—"

"*Don't* touch me, please!" Mary cried sharply. "I don't want you to touch me!"

"That doesn't mean that you believe—"

"I've known Jenny for years. I've never known her to lie. If—if I was silly enough to think—to think that you were a—little different—please let that be forgotten."

"You're trying to dismiss me?" John gasped.

"I did that, several minutes ago, forever," said Mary, and the burning flame of her eye sent even John back a pace. "If you follow me now, if you annoy me ever, I shall ask for help. Let me pass, please, and please do not speak to me again, Mr. Valmer—*ever!*"

She passed, even as John stood with purple cheeks and heaving chest. He made no attempt to follow. He did walk to the door and gaze after her, some five seconds later. Then he turned and stared at his cousins and Dinsmore. The latter avoided his eye, but Ina spoke quite frankly:

"You always were a fool, Jack! Here—why, everything was settled! Everything seemed perfect! And then you must needs have a past tagging along in your wretched wake, and—well, you're not very courteous, are you?" she concluded, as John went down the steps and down the drive.

A gloomy silence brooded again for a little interval.

"I say! Cyclonic household this has gotten to be, eh?" Dinsmore reflected aloud. "Used to think it was stodgy and slow—all that. You remember my commenting on how stodgy and slow things seemed hereabouts, Edie? Did it frequently, in fact; used to be quite dissatisfied. Gad, if a man only knew when—"

"Mr. Penning!" hissed Edith, as the lawyer suddenly appeared before the steps. "Just a minute before you go in!"

The lawyer hesitated. He had meant to devote this whole morning to his garden, and he was not quite so trim as usual.

"I'd better hurry in. Some infernal mess—John telephoned," he said rather breathlessly. "Girl accusing him—seems impossible—"

"I'm afraid it's not," said Mrs. Dinsmore, who had her father's faculty for hanging fast to one idea. "If you'll just pause for a minute and talk with us about—"

"About the case? Oh—"

"No, about Mary! She's here, *now,* forever!"

"Yes, I know. There's been some little disturbance in the household on that account recently, I believe," the lawyer remarked, smiling.

"Yes, but you don't know—John was going to marry her!"

"Eh?"

"He was! They—they seemed to be in love! Oh, I can't explain it, for I don't know, of course, but it was *so!* They were going to be married, and that would have settled it. Then this girl appeared suddenly—"

Her voice clogged. Mr. Dinsmore sighed aloud.

"Seemed to bother Mary. She's like that, you know—rather prim. She threw John over on the spot, Penning. Sounded final, too," he explained.

"And she *looks*—why, she looks as if she was going to fold up her beastly little wings and just die on the spot," Mrs. Dinsmore went on feverishly. "You know what that will mean, with father. You know how amazingly he reacts to anything affecting Mary. His sympathy is always with the sufferer and the under dog, anyhow, and it's too warm for Mary as it is!"

"But, my dear young lady—" the attorney essayed.

"It is! And it 'll reflect directly on that ridiculous scheme of his, and strengthen it. No, it's *not* a far-fetched idea. I know father, and it will. Mr. Penning, if that wretched little creature isn't—isn't simply *thrown* out of the house—yes, do sit down!"

"I will, for a moment," said Penning. It was palpable that at last some of Mrs. Dinsmore's excitement had infected him. "Edith, is all this as serious as it seems, or are you imagining some of it?"

"I'm imagining nothing. I *know!* So do you, as you're perfectly well aware. If she doesn't go soon—"

"All right! Time we found a way of making her go, then," the attorney sighed, with a glance toward the door. "If—if your father needs saving, I'll—er—do my best. Let's see—what has been done so far toward ousting the young woman?"

"Done!" Ina laughed bitterly. "Well, Edith tried to dismiss her. She couldn't be dismissed. Then Henry tried to bully her and scare her. She wouldn't scare. That type always has plenty of nerve, I suppose! Last night we got together and raised a corruption fund."

"To bribe her to go, eh?" mused the attorney, with a pensive glance at Edith

Dinsmore. "Well, well! And she refused the money?"

"She refused twenty-five thousand dollars, when Henry offered it. She informed him that he didn't know the meaning of principle—and that was all!"

"Dear me!" sighed Mr. Penning. "Well, evidently twenty-five thousand's not enough, then. Raise the ante!"

"How can we?"

"If it's as urgent as all this, you'll have to," the attorney said sharply. "You've all got securities—bushels of 'em. They can be sold quietly and without advertising the fact to Mr. Valmer, and—er—ah—*brrr!*" said Mr. Penning, rather oddly, and rose with a dumfounded jerk. "Good—er—morning, Mr. Valmer! Good—ah—yes—morning!"

Stephen, motionless in the doorway, was no very pleasant sight for contemplation just then.

Once upon a time, when Mary had left without warning, Mr. Penning had been quite convinced that Stephen was angry. He had been wrong about that. Stephen, on that lamentable occasion, had been merely a trifle annoyed. *Now* he was mad!

So thoroughly infuriated was Mr. Valmer at this absorbing moment that his eyes suggested, more than anything else, twin tongues of fire darting through a wall of chalk. His hand on the door jamb shook violently. The breath in his nostrils whistled. For some reason, nobody present felt called upon to comment on these singular phenomena.

"Four of you plotting to make life as unpleasant as possible for Mary, eh?" he said.

There was a blood-curdling quiet in his voice. Nobody answered.

"Mary, whose only vices are character and conscience and principle!" Stephen pursued. "Mary, whose chief crime lies in being so infinitely fine that you are unable to endure her presence!" He paused, considering his daughters. "I know women. I know that some of this was to have been expected; but you, Penning! That I should find even *you*—"

"Ah—er—my dear Mr. Valmer!" the attorney protested, with an attempt at suavity that was heartbreaking. "It would appear that you have — er — overheard something—something of a fragmentary nature, and have misconstrued—"

"I have misconstrued nothing — *nothing!*" Stephen exploded suddenly, and so vehemently that the very roof of the veranda echoed. "I know how to deal with this! You may believe me when I tell you that *I know how to deal with this!*"

He turned and vanished into the house again.

Mr. Penning sought to speak. He succeeded only in cackling, with the strangest resemblance to a badly frightened hen.

Mr. Dinsmore, apparently, was shaken through and through. He nodded, he gulped.

"Better for him—to yell like that—to let off some steam that way!" he stammered, at length. "Had a stroke in another second, if he hadn't started to yell! Gad, Penning! That was most unfortunate, eh? That was bad judgment on your part, eh? That—ugh!"

Stephen, at that moment, had reappeared. White as himself, Mary Allers was at his side, and—yes, he was holding Mary's hand. While outwardly he was astoundingly calm, one sensed just beneath the surface a fury beside which all his previous furies dwindled to nothing at all. His blistering eye roved malevolently over the four, and Stephen smiled in a fashion to congeal the blood.

"My daughters! I expected much of you—too much. You have disappointed me. I shall make a limited provision for you," he announced. "My attorney! My attorney, who has betrayed me—I am through with *you!* Yes, I'm through, Penning! Mary!"

"Yes?" the girl responded faintly.

"It is not customary, perhaps, to do this sort of thing quite so publicly, but the reason here is obvious. My child, a long time ago you wanted decent things. I think that I have wanted them all my life. In some measure, each of us has been gratified. In larger measure they have been denied us."

He paused. They waited spellbound.

"I do not speak of love, Mary. That, unhappily, would be absurd in this case; but we have much in common, my dear, and if you will be my wife, and if we go away together, we may find elsewhere some of the things that we both value. Mary, will you do me the great honor of marrying me?"

The world stood quite still. Ina ceased to breathe. So did her sister, and so did her sister's husband. Penning, it seemed, was already entirely petrified.

And Mary?

Life, to the best of Mary's belief, had come to a definite end not half an hour ago. Duty still remained—duty to Stephen Valmer. It was bewildering. In some ways it was terrifying; and still, if she could to some extent repay her debt in tender care of his later years—

Somehow, as she studied the faces so rigidly drawn, a human attribute or two stirred, even in a lifeless Mary. Three of these people, at least, had been at some pains to demonstrate their intense dislike of herself, and had gone to quite absurd lengths to insure her departure from the home.

Abruptly, Mary turned a very wonderful smile on Stephen Valmer.

"Yes — Stephen!" she said softly, but with the utmost distinctness.

XXVIII

Quite in the grand manner, Stephen Valmer bowed over Mary's hand. Then he offered her his arm, and, shoulders squared, escorted her into the cool, spacious depths of the mansion.

"My dear—these things," he said gently and with some difficulty, as he touched her black-uniformed arm. "You will relinquish them at once? I shall write Mrs. Fairson, this afternoon, to come and look after you."

Mary seemed quite as incapable of speech as did the four outdoors.

"I think, Mary," pursued Stephen, still speaking with some difficulty, "that we are —about to contrive a fortunate escape—you and I!"

And with another bow he brought the queer interview to an abrupt termination by stalking away toward the library, a strange, dignified figure.

Mary looked dizzily about her. The stairs—well, one couldn't very well sit on the stairs. The reception room, then? Yes, the reception room would have to do, because it was near; and Mary's legs, usually so dependable, flatly refused to hold her in an upright position one second longer. In the reception room, she swayed into a chair in the corner.

To the four on the veranda speech was returning—not loud, clear, coherent speech, to be sure, but sounds which had at least some significance.

"The — giddy beans!" came from Mr. Dinsmore's direction. "Spilled now, almost seems?"

They paid no heed to this.

"Like the poem," Mr. Dinsmore suggested further. "The cannons, you know, and all that sort of thing—they volleyed and thundered. They made a horrid mess of—whatever troops they were; it's slipped my mind for the moment—because some one had blundered!"

"Some one blundered, all right enough!" his wife agreed thickly. "Is—*is* this really possible?"

"Well, if you saw what I saw, honey, and heard what I heard—"

"It's possible!" Ina cried, with surpassing bitterness. "It's just what has been coming from the very first. If it hadn't happened in this way, it would have happened in some other way. We—we tried to get Mary out, and Mary has got *us* out instead!"

"Well, I say!" faltered Mr. Dinsmore. "It does mean something like that, eh? I mean to say, this place will never be the same old home again, even if we're allowed to stay in it!"

"We shan't be allowed to stay. Have no uncertainty on that score! *You'll* have to go to work, now, Wells, I think."

"Oh, I say!" gasped Mr. Dinsmore.

"It's just rot—rot!" his wife cried. "It will have to be stopped, of course. *You'll* have to stop it, Mr. Penning!"

"I?" the lawyer croaked, suddenly emerging from a black meditation. "I'm through!"

"Oh—that! Yes," Mrs. Dinsmore began carelessly; "but—"

"Well, it may be a matter for you to wave away as inconsequential, madam, but it isn't for me, I assure you of that!" the attorney cried ferociously. "Your father has been my living for a good many years. I've laid away something for my old age, of course, but I had every expectation of continuing to lay away for another ten years. I've given up my practice to look after your father's affairs. I don't know two dozen people in the profession. I haven't a real business connection on earth, except your father. I'm past sixty years old—and I've got to get out and start life all over again!"

"Yes, but even so," Mr. Dinsmore said, with entire seriousness, "I'm worse off than you are, Penning. You've started it once, and you know how it's done. I've never started it!"

It seemed that Mr. Penning would leap at Mr. Dinsmore's throat.

"Well, why all the hysteria?" Mrs. Dinsmore snapped. "Why not get down to the main thing, Mr. Penning? This preposterous marriage will have to be stopped, of course!"

"It will? How?"

"My dear man! You must be at least something of a lawyer—" Edith began, with considerable acerbity.

"Yes, my dear woman, and I'm lawyer enough to tell you that it can't be stopped, if your father and the girl choose to go ahead with it!" Mr. Penning shouted with utterly underbred violence. "The girl is of age and unentangled. Your father is also of age, and entirely sane, I assure you —in the eyes of the law, at any rate. Persuade him to set fire to the house half a dozen times, or to go around assuring people that he's Edward the Confessor, and I'll ask for a commission, and start something. As it is, I assure you," concluded Mr. Penning, with vicious satisfaction, "there's no way of stopping him!"

"Then we really have to submit?" Ina said thinly. "To let this girl—"

"So far as my vision reaches, yes!" panted Mr. Penning. "What do you want, Barton? Me?"

"Mr. Valmer's compliments, sir," the butler said sadly, "and would you be so good as to step to the library and wind up affairs, he said?"

"Yes, I will!" snapped the attorney. "And I'll wind 'em up in damned short order, too!"

Ina pressed her handkerchief to her lips, and whimpered softly. Edith, after one glare, gulped noisily and felt for her own handkerchief. Failing to find it, she rose and hurried into the house and upstairs.

Ina, choking, followed in some few seconds. Mr. Dinsmore, having shrugged four times and thrown out his hands helplessly five times, also staggered to his feet and trailed after them.

Meanwhile, in the reception room, Mary gazed at a queer little divan—and gazed and gazed and gazed, and failed even to see it. She was going to marry Stephen Valmer! *She was going to marry Stephen!* Not John—not his nephew—but Stephen, an—an old man! And she was going to marry him!

Well, if that was what Stephen wished, she had no choice but to comply. Her mind wandered on in a strange numb way. She would be wealthy. In another ten or fifteen years poor Mr. Valmer would be past her care, and she would still be wealthy; but it mattered no more than the breezes of three years ago mattered—the money part of it, that is, and the luxury. There was nothing in the prospect either to attract her or to repel her. She seemed to be past feeling. She—she—was going to marry Stephen Valmer!

The reception room grew stiller, more stuffy and breathless. Mary yearned for light — sunshine — space — flight; but she was bound fast, and could not flee.

She rose very uncertainly, and made her way through the deserted corridor and to the big, open door. The whole landscape had blurred into a foggy mass. In the distance, she caught the sharp chugging of the station wagon's little motor, and she shuddered. Jenny had been delivered to her train.

Jenny always had been rough, and Mary's ancient fondness for her had diminished with the years; but that she could have—

In a twinkling, the landscape was clearing. The station wagon had defined itself suddenly, and in it Jenkins was by no means alone, for on the rear seat sat Jenny Ross and John Valmer. John held tight to Jenny, but there was no hint of affection in the posture. John, indeed, his eyes hard and grim, his hair much rumpled, gripped Miss Ross's arm as if intent upon wrenching it from the socket.

The wagon was stopping now. Jenkins's usually blank face was quite a study in suppressed emotion. John was stepping out, his hold on Miss Ross still firm. White and frightened as she seemed, Jenny managed a weak—

"Well, say, listen! It ain't necessary to pull a person's arm—"

"You may be thankful I'm not wringing your neck!" puffed young Mr. Valmer, who seemed to have caught the prevailing discourtesy. *"There!"*

She was on the ground now, reeling. Mr. Valmer propelled her straight to Mary.

"Now, tell her—quick!" he panted. "She wants to tell you that she lied, Mary!"

"I — yeh! Sure!" Miss Ross choked, "I—I lied!"

"There wasn't one solitary word of truth in it, from start to finish, was there?" John rasped.

"N-no!"

"Well, tell her, then! Tell her that!"

"May—May, there wasn't one solitary word of truth in what I said," Miss Ross gasped. "I done it because—say, I guess I went nutty, May! He—looked good to me, an' I—well, I got to stickin' two an' two together, May, an' I got his number, pretty near. I took a chance on follerin' him to-day. It was the 'V' got me started on that. It ain't such an ordinary initial, an' I thought maybe, stuck on you the way he is, maybe he was a Valmer, too, an' rich, an'—oh, have a heart!"

John shook her.

"Tell her why you did it!" he snarled.

"Huh? Well, if—if I didn't get him, May, it looked like I might get a—a bank roll. Yeh, I'm admittin' it, May. I never pulled one like this before, an' I'm here to tell the whole world I ain't likely to pull another."

"I caught her down at the station before a train came along, Mary," John explained swiftly. "I told her precisely what she was going to get in the way of a jail sentence, if she wanted to try going through with it. I gave her one chance of avoiding it by coming back with me—and she took it. Well, Mary?"

"Is it really—*really* true—" Mary began, and choked.

"Aw, say, listen!" Miss Ross dared to sneer. "I dunno. I ain't got much dope on the subject; but I got a sneakin' suspicion that a girl could ride around all night in a taxi with *that* guy, an' he'd never so much as try to hold her hand!"

"Convinced, Mary?" asked young Mr. Valmer.

"Oh, John—John!" shuddered from Mary's glad throat.

"Jenkins! Take hold of this girl!" John snapped. "Take her around to the garage, and then take her down to the station in one of the other cars. No, leave the station wagon here. I want to use it. Don't lose sight of her until she's on a train heading for New York!"

Arms hanging in a curiously elemental, gorilla fashion, chin thrust forward, he waited until the pair had vanished. Then he turned to Mary.

"You come!" he commanded.

"Come—where?"

"Right along with me! I'll take no more chances with you, Mary, or with liars, or with anything else. I don't know just where in the neighborhood one can get a ring, or a license, or a minister, but that little wagon can go like sin, and it 'll never stop till I've found all three!"

"Oh, but—John!" Mary gasped. "Why—this uniform—I mean—"

"Chuck the cap and tear off that devilish apron!" the forceful young man ordered, and did both for her. "Whose coat's that? Never mind! Here! *Put it on,* Mary! Stop your wriggling!"

"John!" the girl protested. "I want to—to—tell you—"

"You tell me later, Mary, when the important part's over!" replied John. He picked her up bodily and started down the steps. "You and me, Mary! We're going to get acquainted now!"

XXIX

ELSEWHERE in the Valmer house, nature asserting herself, a cooling process was in progress.

Edith, upstairs, gave one manifestation of it in her newer mood. She was calmer now, and knew within her a peculiar stirring, which she was not yet quite able to identify as conscience.

"Well, for one thing, we went at it in the wrong way," she confessed. "We've been used to bullying father, or trying to bully him, and we've formed a habit of trying it on too many other people."

"That's quite true!" her husband agreed earnestly. "I've always said—"

"Looking squarely at the thing," Ina conceded bitterly, "father's little whims have always been harmless. Even Mary was harmless, originally, I suppose. She—of course, she—well, hang the confounded little wretch! We've mainly ourselves to blame."

"Because, if we'd just let him alone, instead of rousing that awful temper of his, father could have been talked out of his Valmer Foundation idea, bit by bit, just as gently as we knew how. Penning would have helped. Now, I suppose," Edith mused sadly, "they'll get married, and go off somewhere, and start the beastly thing after all. Oh, it's awful! That's just all it is—*awful!*"

"Well, but don't you see," Mr. Dinsmore tried again, "so long as you admit to yourselves that you were wrong, that's the first step in the right direction, isn't it? I mean to say, father proposed when he was furious, and the girl accepted him because she hated us—and small blame to her, if it comes to that. If we just go down calmly, a little later, and try to talk it over in a sane way—eh? Tell him in so many words he's dead right about everything, and then see if he won't see the light of reason. If he should," Mr. Dinsmore concluded fervently, "we'd keep on telling him that he was right to the end of his days!"

Edith sighed heavily.

"We might try that—after a while," she said moodily.

The cooling process had also descended upon at least one gentleman in the Valmer library.

Stephen, you see, had depended on Mr. Penning these many, many years. Now, with the expression of a professional mourner in a state of extreme irritation, Penning was winding things up with a vengeance. He was slapping documents into little bundles, snapping rubber bands about them, jotting down notes, and grunting sourly to himself.

Presently he would be gone, and after that Stephen Valmer would have to break in some other attorney. He would have to explain a thousand details with which he himself was none too familiar. He would stumble into a thousand legal pitfalls that Penning could so well have avoided for him. Not, of course, that Mr. Valmer meant to apologize to the darned old fool and ask him to go on working as before, but—

And Mary, too! Stephen turned chilly for a moment. That had been the most purely absurd move of his whole life! A girl—a child, indeed—and still his promised bride! Well, he had asked her because —because—because—

"*Penning!*" Mr. Valmer suddenly hurled at his attorney.

"What?" snapped the lawyer.

"I'm an ass!"

"Far be it from me to contradict you!" said Mr. Penning.

"Huh? See here, sir! How dare you—"

"What have I got to lose? I'm *through!*" the attorney said bitterly.

After this he went on bunching documents, snapping rubber bands, jotting down notes, and grunting. Stephen watched him, breathing heavily at first — presently breathing not so heavily.

Mr. Valmer sat back with a dignity which grew steadily colder and colder. Finally, he cleared his throat twice.

"Penning, I have—er—reconsidered!" he stated icily.

"Reconsidered what?"

"You," Stephen replied, still more icily. "You may remain with me, as my attorney, quite as usual. Er—ahem!"

"*Is that so?*" rasped the lawyer. His tone certainly suggested fury in those first words, but the suggestion departed in a fraction of a second. "Well—ahem!—of course, if that *is* so," said Mr. Penning, "why—thank you! Shall I go on with this winding up of affairs?"

"You shall not," said Stephen. "Drop it immediately. I wish to consult you about another matter."

"Well?"

"Mary!"

"Ah—the bride-to-be!"

"See here, Penning! Don't sneer at me! I've admitted that I'm an ass, but I have no intention of getting down on my knees to *you*, and asking *your* forgiveness. Penning, it—it would be unjust to that charming young girl. How am I going to get out of it gracefully?"

Sharp anxiety crept into the old man's voice. Mr. Penning crossed his legs and smiled heavily. He had not expected to enjoy this interview, but he was enjoying it now.

"Frankly, Valmer, you're not going to get out of it," he said, in an easy conversational style. "Putting a young woman in the way of inheriting ten or eleven millions of dollars is not being unjust to her. It is a fine thing for her. You like Mary, and I don't blame you. Mary, it would seem—"

"All right!" Stephen interrupted hotly. "You know perfectly well what I mean. It's grotesque and—and impossible for a lovely child like that! How am I going to get out of it?"

Mr. Penning shrugged.

"Well, it's always possible to ask Mary for your release, I suppose," he suggested. "Mary's as reasonable a young woman as I've ever met, in some respects, though in some others she's the most unreasonable female alive. Of course, into which class this little slip of yours may fall, I cannot say, but—"

"Well, we'll find Mary and determine it," Stephen said, as he arose. "You come, too. You may be able to help."

They came to the corridor just as another group of three subdued persons appeared at the stairhead. The upper group paused, huddling together in apparent alarm, unwilling to advance.

Barton relieved matters for the moment by popping up from below.

"Oh, I beg pardon, sir—I was just looking for you, Mr. Valmer. They — they wouldn't take time to talk to you on the telephone just now, I believe."

"Who wouldn't?"

"Well, as nearly as I understood Mr. John, sir," the butler replied, smiling, "he and Miss Mary have been married very sudden like, and—"

"Where?" gasped Stephen.

"In the village, I took it, sir. They said they'd be coming home here in a day or two, when—"

"Well, upon my soul!" cried his employer, and roared out perfectly senseless laughter. "Jilted! D'ye hear that, Penning? *Jilted!*" He slapped Mr. Penning's back so violently that that gentleman just managed to catch his glasses as they fell. "Penning—*jilted!* Ho, ho, ho, ho!"

Barton sighed heavily as the library door closed again, and descended to the nether regions with shaking head.

Upstairs, three people, chatting in an insane undertone, tiptoed back to the Dinsmore suite.

In the library, Mr. Valmer sprawled into his chair. He wished to tremble. He controlled it for a little, and then did permit himself one or two small trembles. He was very, very limp, was Mr. Valmer. He breathed in long sighs and grew limper.

Mr. Penning was not so easily affected, of course. He shuffled over papers, and presently glanced up with—

"Now, here's a mass of stuff about the Valmer Foundation. Shall I—"

"Tear them up!" said Stephen's thin, small voice.

"But you've been—"

"Tear 'em up, Penning! Tear 'em up, I tell you!" Stephen croaked weakly.

For an instant the *Man Friday* studied his master. Then he, too, heaved one great sigh of relief and began to tear the papers, absently, but thoroughly and into very small pieces.

"Yep—quite so. All right!" said Mr. Penning. "Now what are we going to do about these railroad bonds?"

THE END

YOU WHO TOIL IN MERCHANT TOWN

Oh, you who toil in Merchant Town
  And send your ships to sea,
Do not despise my little boats
  That bring no gold to me.

Your ships on charted waters sail
  For certain cargoes bound—
Commodities that never fail
  To bring you pence and pound;

But mine on trackless seas put out
  Wherever winds may blow,
And, sailing, may go round about
  To bring me what I know.

My cargoes vary with the moon,
  But some of them are bright
And glitter in the sun at noon,
  Or in the mind at night.

Your ships come back to Merchant Town
  With naught of you from sea—
Be merciful if mine go down,
  Or bring me only me!

Charles Divine

A Queer Human Kink

WHAT strange bundles of contradictions we all are! We tell each other earnestly that health is one of the most precious things in life—and yet what do we do to keep it, to protect it? It's a queer kink in human nature, isn't it, to *think* one way and *act* just the opposite!

The Harm of Self-Diagnosis

You know how idle people love to talk over symptoms and recklessly recommend all sorts of cure-all remedies.

What a tremendous amount of harm is done by attempts at self-diagnosis! Here is an example: A prominent man made up his mind that he was eating too much meat and heroically put himself on a strict diet. Sometime later, he was taken ill. His doctor astonished him by saying that while most men of his age would have benefited by doing what he had done, his case was an exception and that *lack* of meat caused the trouble.

How Long Do You Want To Live?

Just so long as you are well and happy? Good!—but suppose you keep right on living long after you have ceased to be well!

Stop right here and think about it.

You would not treat your car as you treat yourself. You constantly test the steering gear and the brake bands. You make sure that bolts are tight. You listen to the motor for the faintest "knock". You are careful about the fuel mixture—it must not be too rich nor too lean or the engine will not pull properly.

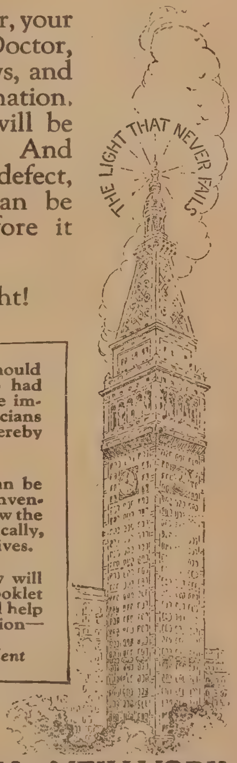
But do you know whether the food—the "fuel mixture"—that you give your own body is too rich or too lean? You can replace parts of your car, but you can't replace a worn-out heart, an abused stomach, an over-worked liver or frayed nerves.

Years Alone Do Not Age Us

The physical changes ascribed to age may be due to poison, infection, wrong food or emotional strain, principally worry. And these things are in large degree under our own control.

Go to your wisest adviser, your own good friend, your Doctor, within the next few days, and have a *thorough* examination. If you are well, you will be glad to have his O. K. And if he finds some slight defect, be thankful that it can be corrected in time—before it becomes serious.

Begin the New Year right!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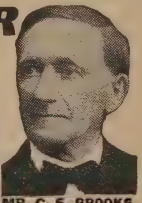

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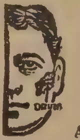

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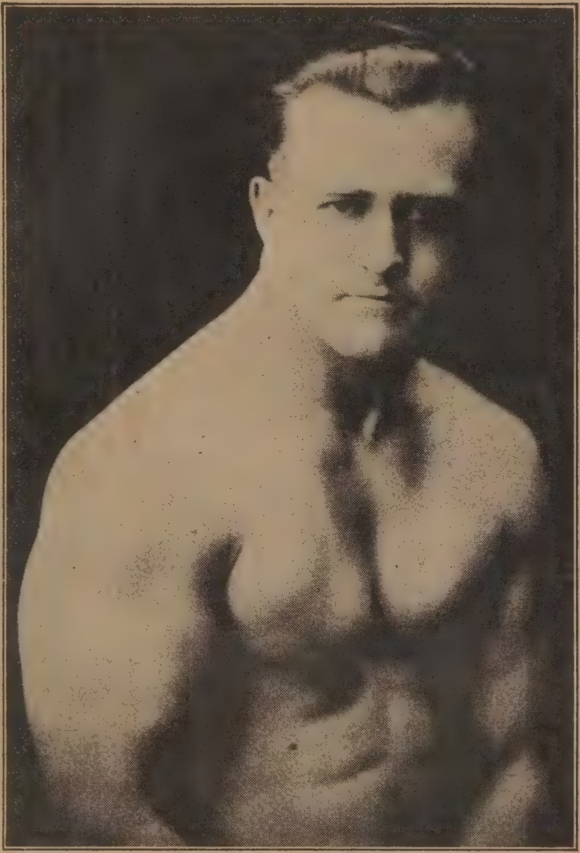

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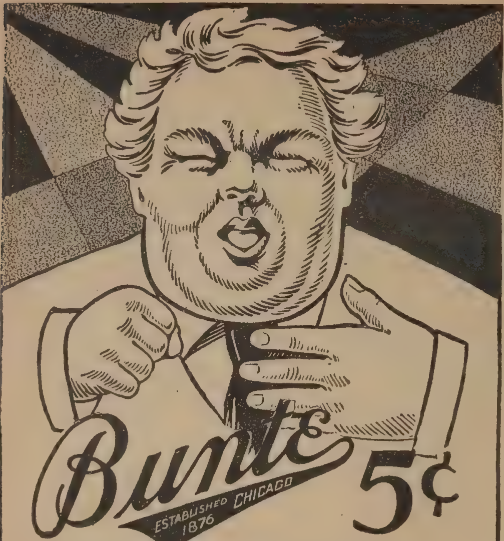

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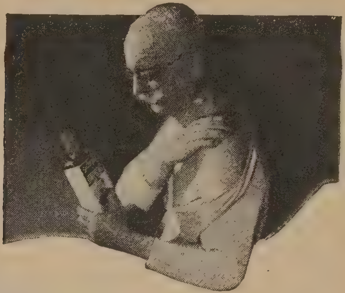

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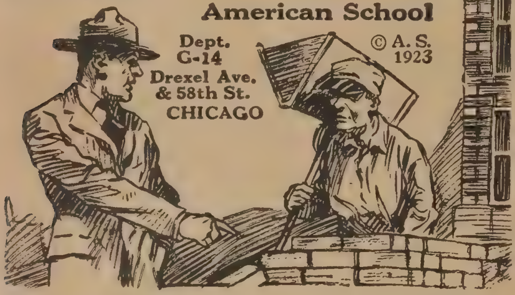

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Infantile Paralysis caused my son to have club feet. I took him to McLain Sanitarium in 1919. He was 6 years old, and could neither stand or walk on his bare feet. Now he has normally shaped feet, plump straight legs and can walk as good as any boy. I strongly recommend McLain's.

JOHN NELSON,
Galena Bay,
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Walter Nelson was brought 2500 miles to have his feet straightened. Edgar Franco was brought from Quito, South America, 3000 miles; Dennis Burrowes was brought from Kingston, Jamaica, British West Indies, 2000 miles, to have their feet straightened. Harry G. Bayers came from Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1500 miles, to have his deformity, resulting from Infantile Paralysis, corrected.

Hundreds nearer home have come for treatment of various paralyzed and deformed conditions. Parents of crippled children and young adults should know of this institution. Information and Literature mailed free.

McLAIN ORTHOPEDIC SANITARIUM
954 Aubert Ave. St. Louis, Mo.

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Did he have a right to suspect her?

DUNBAR was in a terrible state of mind. He was worried sick about his wife. She had been acting very strangely during the past several months.

The thing that troubled him most was that she now responded very reluctantly to his affectionate advances. She wouldn't even let him kiss her. The whole state of affairs was driving him mad. He suspected everything. And, yet, he alone was to blame.

* * *

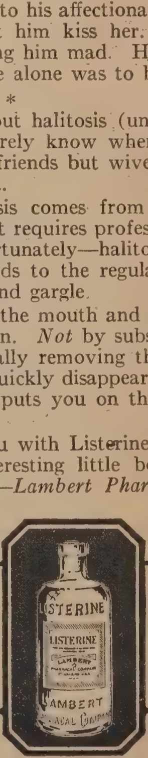
That's the insidious thing about halitosis (unpleasant breath). You, yourself, rarely know when you have it. And not only closest friends but wives and husbands dodge this one subject.

Sometimes, of course, halitosis comes from some deep-seated organic disorder that requires professional advice. But usually—and fortunately—halitosis is only a local condition that yields to the regular use of Listerine as a mouth wash and gargle.

It halts food fermentation in the mouth and leaves the breath sweet, fresh and clean. *Not* by substituting some other odor but by really removing the old one. The Listerine odor itself quickly disappears. So the systematic use of Listerine puts you on the safe and polite side.

Your druggist will supply you with Listerine. He sells lots of it. Read the interesting little booklet that comes with every bottle.—*Lambert Pharmacal Company, St. Louis, U. S. A*

For **HALITOSIS** *use* **LISTERINE**



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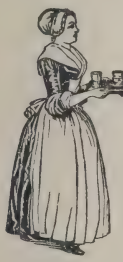

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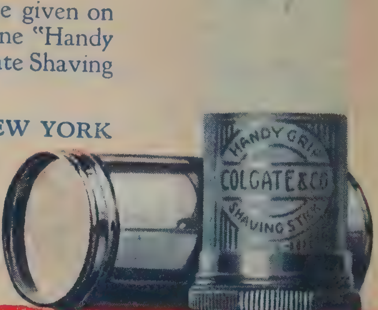

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